



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

# BAPTIZED SERVANTS

## Suggestions for Study and Discussion

### REDISCOVERING OTHERS AND OURSELVES IN SERVICE

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**“God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday** provides an opportunity to serve our neighbors in new ways and with new partners. It also provides an opportunity to gain new insights, to be renewed in faith and to gain fresh strength for serving in all our daily callings. This resource offers suggestions for small group discussion and individual reflection that explores the relationships we have when we are baptized into Christ’s life.

Loving, liberated service to others is more than a one-time or even ongoing activity. Being baptized into Christ’s life creates a whole new world of relationships – with God, with others and even with ourselves – that is characterized by loving, liberated service.

The goal of these suggestions for study and discussion is to explore the *relationships* that we have in Christ as loving, liberated servants. Listed below are some suggestions for thinking and talking with others, grouped by the number of people involved. Each grouping includes a variety of suggestions to fit your personal interest or local needs.

- **A quick dip** suggests a few questions or prompts for a brief exploration of this activity as part of a whole baptismal life filled with loving service. You can do one briefly while you travel to a work location or at the beginning of your activity.
- **Wading in** suggests some possibilities for 30-60 minutes of conversation before or after the service activity on the same day.
- **Diving deeper** suggests some possibilities for in-depth reading and discussion of a short book as a whole community in two to three sessions. (These sessions can also be adapted for small group or individual uses.)

## IN A SMALL GROUP OF FOUR TO EIGHT PEOPLE

Designed to be used in a small group, these prompts can also be adapted for use in a large group session with discussion in several small groups or for individual use.

***A quick dip*** – “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). On your way to your work location or before you begin, take 5-10 minutes with your group to talk about one of the following.

- Invite each person to name a skill or gift they bring to today’s service. (Possibilities can include gifts such as a joyful heart and a readiness to serve. It’s OK for anyone to pass.) Then invite each person to name a gift they need from others and hope others will bring. Offer a brief prayer of thanks for the blessing of being gifts to each other in Christ’s one body.
- Begin with one person naming an individual or group who will be blessed by today’s service activity. Then invite someone else to name someone who will be blessed by that individual or group. Continue to use a blessing perspective to imagine how far the chain of blessing can extend. When you come a stopping point in the chain, quickly ask two questions. How well do you know the people at the other end of the chain? Is there a blessing that can return to you through the chain or some other way? Offer a prayer of thanks for the bonds that unite us as Christ’s body and for the opportunity to serve each other in that life together.
- Take a few minutes to explore how you will describe to others what you are doing today. How will you describe the service, yourselves and those who benefit? How can the words you use honor everyone involved as members of one body of Christ? Who will you tell about what you did today? Offer a prayer asking for the Spirit’s guidance in all the places you serve and for all the ways you speak about those you are connected to in serving.

***Wading in*** – Take 30-60 minutes to explore some ideas and perspectives, imagine some new possibilities, and pray.

- “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). Much popular religion talks as if we were the primary actors in our lives and God is mostly the passive object of our religious actions, either directly (worship, devotions, prayer) or indirectly (service to others, etc.). This biblical word turns it around: God is the primary actor “*in you*.” Take turns sharing your stories in response to some of the following questions.
  1. When have you been aware of *God* at work *in you*?
  2. Was God’s work in you or enabling you more controlling or more liberating?
  3. Looking back, what do you see was God’s “good pleasure” that was at work in you?

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... [who] emptied himself” (Philippians 2:5, 7). What is God up to with your life when you have been joined to Christ in baptism? A service activity like today’s can help you to see more clearly what God is doing in all your daily callings. The apostle Paul called it being poured out for the life of others. Again, take turns sharing stories of your faith experience.
  1. Where do you pour yourself out most freely to others because Christ’s life is overflowing in you?
  2. Where do you sometimes (or often?) end up feeling drained in your service to others?
  3. Have you ever experienced “accidental spillage,” when you ended up serving others without intending to do so?
  4. Where do you sense the mind of Christ is leading you to pour yourself out for others now?
- “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). A whole life of service flows freely from confidence that God’s baptismal promise of life in Christ will be made complete.
  1. When God’s promise is made complete in your life, with whom will you have been a partner in service?
  2. When God’s promise is made complete in your life, where will you have gone in service?
  3. When God’s promise is made complete in your life, what will have been your greatest joy in serving?

***Diving deeper:*** Use or adapt the following suggestions as a starting outline or framework for a two- or three-session study in your congregation or group as you prepare for your ELCA Day of Service activities. These suggestions can also be used for individual reading and reflection.

One of Martin Luther’s most influential writings, “On Christian Freedom,”<sup>1</sup> includes this famous two-part assertion:

A Christian is a completely free lord of all, subject to none.  
A Christian is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Later he summarizes this essay’s message in a single sentence: A Christian “is lord of sin, death, and hell but, at the same time, servant and obedient and beneficial to all.”

1. In preparation for the first session, read the first part of “On Christian Freedom” on “the inner person.” (Luther’s Works 31:343-358; Tranvik translation, pp. 49-70; Wengert translation, pp. 487-510)

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<sup>1</sup> This writing is widely available in libraries in a variety of English translations and editions. Translations by W. A. Lambert (Luther’s Works, 1957), Mark Tranvik (2008), and Timothy Wengert (Annotated Luther Series, 2015) are available for purchase from Augsburg Fortress Publishers (800-328-4648; augsburgfortress.org) and other retailers.

2. Use some of the following prompts for conversation in the first session (or in your own reflection and writing). You can also explore your own questions about this reading and what it says.
- The promises that God makes in God's Word call to life "a spiritual, inner and new creature" in Christ who trusts God and enjoys freedom. In conversation with others, share a story or example of when you have experienced the *freeing* power of God's Word most powerfully and memorably. What continues to make this liberation you experienced memorable or meaningful for you today?
  - To uphold this freedom in God's promises, Luther clarifies the differences between God's commandments and promises (or law and gospel): "God's promises give what the law demands, so that everything may belong to God alone, both the commands and their fulfillment." Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote that "we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand ... ." (Ephesians 2:10). Where do you most often experience God's promise working a good work in you?
    - In your family life
    - Among your friends
    - At school or work
    - In a church activity like worship or a small group for study or prayer
    - In a community activity, hobby or service project with others
    - When you are with your own thought or in an activity by yourself
  - In a remarkable image, Luther says that the faith that trusts God confidently is not simply united with God's promises but "fully swallowed up by them." What language or image do you use or find most helpful for describing how God's promises in Christ affect you?
  - Luther describes the benefit in terms of three "powers" that faith has: liberation from the demands and condemnation of God's law; a right relationship with God that trusts God to be truthful and worthy of honor; and a joyous, intimate union with Christ, like the union of marriage partners. In this union with Christ, Christians are the beneficiaries of a "joyous exchange" where Christ bears the burden of their sinfulness, and in return Christians receive the astonishing and undeserved gift of Christ's mercy and love.
    - Which of these "powers" or benefits do you experience as most liberating?
    - Which have you found to be most empowering?
    - Which brings you closest to where you believe God wants you to be?
  - As a result, Christians have a standing in spiritual matters like "kings and priests." None of the spiritual "powers and principalities" that oppose God and threaten God's people (as described in Romans 8:37-39) will prevail against those who are united to Christ. The best Christian preaching leads to a confident trust that we are, in this sense, "lords of all, subject to none."
    - When have you heard this kind of preaching?
    - What preaching gives you confidence in your standing with God in Christ?

3. In preparation for the second session, read the second part of “On Christian Freedom” on “the outer person.” (Luther’s Works 31:358-377; Tranvik translation, pp. 71-96; Wengert translation, pp. 510-538).
4. Use some of the following prompts for conversation in the second session (or in your own reflection and writing). You can also explore your own questions about this reading and what it says.
  - Luther continues his exploration of Christian freedom with a discussion about the source and purpose of “good works.” In short, “just as faith makes someone a believer and righteous, so also it produces good works.” For those united to Christ these works are the “fruit of the Spirit” and flow freely and spontaneously from faith, not from any compulsion or demand. Share a story about a time when you discovered yourself acting generously or compassionately in a way you did not plan or expect. Do you associate these experiences with the Holy Spirit?
  - When he turns to the purpose or goal of a Christian’s service, he writes, “We should be guided in all our works by this one thought alone – that we may serve and benefit others in everything that is done, having nothing else before our eyes except the need and advantage of the neighbor.” Consider one or more of the following questions for conversation.
    - A famous parable that Jesus told turns on the question “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29-37). Whom do you consider to be your neighbor?
    - Here is another way of asking about neighbors. List the people whom you serve in your various activities throughout the day. Do you see those people as your neighbors?
    - Another way: Whose needs do you think you are best prepared to serve? Are they your neighbors? Whose needs make you feel most helpless? With whom can you partner to serve those needs?
    - Which of the following statements best expresses what you think it means to serve the “advantage of [your] neighbor”?
  - Giving your co-workers opportunities to develop and use their best abilities
  - Working with others to remove barriers of exclusion, prejudice and hatred that limit your neighbors’ freedom and full participation in public life
  - Sacrificing or deferring an advantage or privilege you have so that your neighbor has the opportunity to use it
  - Working for “the common good” – what benefits and improves the whole community, nation and world
  - Helping your neighbors to “improve and protect their property and income” (Small Catechism, Seventh Commandment)

- In an interesting passage Luther talks about the service of self-discipline as a Christian. He observes that some become so obsessed with their vain attempts to use their service in self-justification that they come to the point of “injuring their [own] minds and destroying, or at least rendering useless, what makes them human” (Wengert, 512). We serve ourselves best when we simply allow Christ to be our righteousness and Christ’s life to flow through us to our neighbors, so that “we are a second Christ to one another, doing for our neighbors what Christ does for us” (525).
  - Think of some of the situations, times and places when you are most vulnerable to making defensive self-justifications. Are those also times when your self-discipline gives way to angry, hurtful words or actions?
  - List some times and places when you have observed Christ’s love flowing through you to a neighbor. Is self-discipline more like planning for and choosing these times and places or like getting out of the way when you sense Christ’s life moving through you?

## BY YOURSELF OR WITH ONE OTHER PERSON

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***A quick dip*** – God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah is also a baptismal promise to you in Christ. “I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). Take 5-10 minutes before today’s service activity to jot a few thoughts or discuss briefly with another person one of the following.

- Quickly identify some of the people who will benefit from the service you do today. Do you know them already, will you meet them for the first time today, or will you not meet them at all? Is there something you will learn or receive from them today? Offer a brief prayer of thanks and care for the people connected to you in today’s service.
- Quickly name three to five parts of your body you will use in service today. What are some physical abilities in which you have some degree of skill or expertise? Where else can you use these abilities? Offer a brief prayer of thanks for the blessing and joy of a body you can use in service.
- Quickly list some favorite songs or singers. Do you listen to music while you work? What songs open you up or give you energy for new work and new people? Offer a brief prayer of thanks to God for the blessings of music and new friends.

**Wading in** – Take 30-60 minutes to explore some ideas and perspectives, imagine some new possibilities and pray. Martin Luther once wrote that “We receive our blessings not from other human creatures, but from God, through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings.” (Large Catechism, First Commandment)

- Take several minutes to list the people who have held you in their arms or held your hand.
  1. What blessings from God have come to you from those hands?
  2. Whose hands have invested the most in bringing God’s blessing to you? Take some time to write or remember a story of when an especially important blessing came to you from God through that person’s hands.
- Close your eyes and visualize what you do with your hands on a typical day, beginning with when you awake, continuing until you go to sleep at the end of the day. When you have visualized an entire typical day, reflect on the following questions.
  1. Pay attention to the things you handle during the day. What are some ways you can use those things to bless others?
  2. Do you use your hands to touch or hold others’ hands during the day? Are there others who could benefit from responsible touch from your hands?
  3. How do you use your hands for expression when you communicate? How do you communicate blessing with your hands?
- Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for those who have invested your life with blessing, for God’s promise that you will be a blessing to others in Christ, for the blessing that others are for you.

In Jesus Christ, all of life – every act of service, in every daily calling, in every corner of life – flows freely from a living, daring confidence in God’s grace.