

MISSION IN ACTION



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2008 Lenten Study Guide
Lutheran Church of Hope

Welcome to the Small Group Study for Lent 2008! This year, Lutheran Church of Hope's yearlong focus is Hope for the World. We know that the only true "hope for the world" is Jesus Christ, and in this year, we are learning what it means to be Christ's hands and feet in the world, and then practicing what we've learned. The Bible is very clear that our faith is lived out in action, so grab your Bible, your small group, and strap in, we're gonna get moving!

~Pastor Caroline

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH?

Week 3

Hopefully, this last week you've become more informed about one of the countries Hope sends missionaries or where Hope is active in supporting mission work. As you begin your time together, share with your group what you learned and how you would like to become more active in that area of the world.

This week we want to explore the role of the Church in reaching out in missions. Where does the Church fit in?

- ❖ How do you define "church"? What does "church" look like to you?

Read Acts 2:37-47

Acts is the history of the early Christian church and here we have a picture of the church as it is just beginning.

- ❖ Is Luke (the author of Acts) describing a building, a denomination, a worship service, or a pastor?
- ❖ Do you ever think of "church" as a building, worship service, pastor, or denomination? Do you think you could find that definition in the New Testament?

In the New Testament, the Greek word we translate as "church" means an assembly or a gathering of believers. In the New Testament, the "church" is about relationships. Of course, we understand that out of these relationships come worship services, buildings, pastors, and sometimes denominations. But first and foremost, church is a gathering of believers. Church is You!

Read Eph 2:19-22

Paul is giving us one of the pictures of church we find in the New Testament – a temple made of people. Interestingly, the only church the New Testament describes of is made of people, not bricks and mortar.

Paul also reminds us of a very freeing fact; we are no longer strangers or aliens, but we have become a dwelling place for God. The foundation of this temple is made of the apostles and prophets, oftentimes understood as the witness of both the Old and New Testament, with Jesus as the chief cornerstone. So we are "living stones" that are fitted together with other believers as the church grows. Which means we carry "church" with us wherever we go – kind of like a turtle carries her home with her everywhere she goes!

- ❖ If you are a "living stone" in the Temple of the Lord, can you do Christianity by yourself?
- ❖ Have you ever confused a personal faith with a private faith? What would Paul say to the idea of a private Christianity, given this passage in Ephesians?

Reread Acts 2:37-47

- ❖ Go through this passage and list all the things Luke describes the early church doing.
- ❖ Now go through the passage and list all the things Luke describes God doing.

How did you do? Let's compare lists:

What the early church was doing

- Witnessing (evangelizing) – verse 40
- Baptizing – v 41
- Discipling – v 42
- Fellowship – v 42 and 46
- Communion – v 42
- Praying – v 42
- Wonders and signs – v 43
- Caring for the poor – v 45
- Worshiping together – v 46

The early church must have been an exciting place to be with all that was going on!

Now what does Luke point out that God was doing? In verse 47, Luke writes that God was adding to the numbers being saved. Isn't it interesting that when the early church was doing what it was called to do (sharing the good news, discipling each other, living life together, and caring for the poor) that *God* caused the church to grow?

Read Matt 16:16-18

Did you catch who would build the church? It's important to read carefully, because *Jesus* is going to build *his* church. It's not *our* church, and *we* can't force the growth. Just like farmers can plant the seed, weed, water, and harvest a crop, only God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall. Church growth seems to happen naturally, organically (in other words through God's power), when the church is following Jesus.

- ❖ Does understanding that Jesus says *he* will build *his* church change your thoughts about church growth? Does it challenge you in your understanding of what it means to be a member of Hope?
- ❖ Given these two passages, what responsibilities does a Christian have in church and the growth of the church? What is God's promise for the church?

As we look at the world through Jesus' eyes, we recognize that the world is not the way it should be; we all would like the world to be a better place. Many individual Christians try to make a difference in the world. Albert Switzer left a career as a brilliant philosopher and musician in Europe to become a doctor in Africa. Mother Teresa joined a religious order and chose to work among the diseased and dying in Calcutta. Individuals are definitely called to make a difference in the world.

Read Matt 25:1-13

In Matthew 25, Jesus is teaching his followers about how they are called to live as they wait for him to return the second time. This first parable focuses on the need to wait expectantly, to live as though we truly believe Jesus is actually coming back today. He wants us to have a sense of anticipation and not to become complacent in our lives and especially in our relationships with God and with each other.

- ❖ Do you live with a sense of anticipation? Why or why not?
- ❖ What are you doing today to be ready for Jesus' return? Are there things in your life you need to add or subtract to live expectantly for Jesus' return?

Read Matt 25:14-30

The second parable concentrates on the need to live responsibly. We have all been given talents, gifts, life experiences, passions, and abilities that God expects us to use to care for each other and glorify him. Be sure to read the passage carefully and notice the reward each of the faithful servants received for investing their talent wisely.

- ❖ Did the faithful servants receive different rewards based upon the amount of money their investments returned? Are we to invest ourselves so we get a bigger room in the heavenly mansion or because investing ourselves glorifies God?
- ❖ Are you living responsibly, investing yourself in things that glorify God? Remember that time is often the most precious commodity in our lives. How are you investing your time? Your abilities? Your money?
- ❖ Are you investing in things that will last? In things that will last an eternity?

Read Matt 25:31-46

Jesus is sharing his vision of the Last Judgment in this passage. In a strict sense, this is not a parable since parables start with something that is familiar to us (wedding parties and lamps, masters and servants) to point to something that is unfamiliar (a quality of the kingdom that may not have occurred to us otherwise). It is probably more useful to consider this text as a vision in which Jesus is trying to communicate a difficult concept or idea using pictures instead of trying to find words, given the limits of our finite human language.

This text also differs from the first two parables in a very important way. Did you catch it as you read? Hint: reread verse 32. The first two parables are addressed to individuals (foolish bridesmaids, unfaithful servant), but this third text is addressed to the nations. Since "nations" are a group of people with a common government or ethnicity, for this study, we can substitute "church" since we have a common government (we live under God's reign and rule) and a common ethnicity (we are children of the same heavenly Father).

- ❖ Does looking at this familiar text in a different way change how you respond to it?
- ❖ Does looking at this familiar text in a different way change how the church should respond to it? Don't forget that you are the church!

This vision is value-laden to the nth degree, which can sometimes make us uncomfortable. The sheep, who are the righteous ones, are told they will enter the kingdom of heaven because they responded to human need. The sheep reacted with confusion, thinking there must be a mistake – they never saw Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. The sheep don't feel like they can take credit for having done these things for Jesus. Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

This would be a wonderful, upbeat way to conclude the story; we all love happy endings!

But the story has a flip side; there are the goats ... and the goats don't make it. Their half of the story is a mirror image of the story of the sheep, except they did not respond to human need.

The goats are bewildered too, which is one thing they share with the sheep. There must have been a mistake – when did they ever see Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or a prisoner?? And they receive the same answer the sheep did with one little addition: “Truly I tell you, just as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did *not* do it to me.”

- ❖ Do you think it matters to Jesus how we as the church live our lives? Do you think it matters to Jesus how we as the church treat those in the world who are struggling?
- ❖ Quick check what begins to happen immediately after Jesus shares these teachings with his disciples, in Matt 26. Do you think Jesus had a sense of urgency when he shared this vision with his disciples, given what was to happen very soon?
- ❖ Should we as the church have a sense of urgency about the plight of the poor, the outcast, the lonely, the foreigner?

Where does the church fit? In *all* of life – together with each other as we grow in faith, and with all those in the world for whom God calls us to care.

Closing Prayer:

Lord God,
You surround the whole earth with Your favor,
and desire that none of Your children should die.

Bless all who are striving to make a better world.

We pray especially for all
who are valiant for truth;
who are working for pure and just laws;
who are working for peace between nations;
who are engaged in healing disease;
who are engaged in the relief of poverty;
who are engaged in the rescue of the fallen;
who preach the gospel;
who bear witness to Christ in foreign lands;
who suffer for righteousness' sake.

Cast down all the forces of cruelty and wrong.
Defeat all selfish and worldly-minded schemes.

Prosper all that is conceived in the spirit of Christ
and carried out to the honor of His name.

Amen.

~adapted from John Baillie

This week, continue to explore how you, as the church, fit into our world.

First, ask God to show you how to live more expectantly and responsibly with the time and the abilities he has entrusted to you. Put into action those things God reveals.

Secondly, since your small group is the church, pray about and discuss where God is calling your group to be the church. Don't be surprised if you need to boost your study or prayer time together so you have the fuel to go and serve where God is challenging your group to go, because he *is* challenging you! Is the challenge to your small group to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or the prisoner? During Lent, the wider congregation of Lutheran Church of Hope is taking very seriously the challenge to provide water to the thirsty. How will your small group participate in that effort and in other opportunities to serve Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor?



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