



LIFE OF FAITH

Trusting Jesus. Serving our Neighbors.

Expanding “God’s Work. Our Hands.” from a *Day of Service* to a *Life of Faith*

“God’s Work. Our Hands.” is an opportunity “to explore one of our most basic convictions as Lutherans: that all of life in Jesus Christ—every act of service, in every daily calling, in every corner of life—flows freely from a living, daring confidence in God’s grace.” As the ELCA website says, the intent is to reinforce the reality that “You work every day to make your community a better place.”¹ Without careful reflection and equipping, we can leave the impression that our call to participate in God’s work is fulfilled on this one day of service each year, and then we return to our workaday world where God is largely absent.

This document describes a way to expand “God’s Work. Our Hands.” from being a single day of service to a way to equip our people for a life of faith², so that “every act of service, in every daily calling, in every corner of life flows freely from a living, daring confidence in God’s grace” indeed.

The central focus of this document is found in the Small Catechism, in Luther’s explanation of the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us today our daily bread” (see September 9, below). The focus of each week in the series is on Luther’s explanations of the second table of the Ten Commandments, particularly in the last phrase of each commandment, the “but instead,” positive intent of the commandments. In reality, God’s work, providing “everything our bodies need” (fourth petition) is done through our hands on behalf of our neighbor³—every day of our lives.

This emphasis is designed to begin in worship on September 9, with a focus on the central claim found in the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer. The following six Sundays then focus on one of the Ten Commandments. **Note** that an important part of this journey is the use of wristbands; they can be ordered at <https://oldlutheran.com/collections/elca>. The emphasis concludes the Sunday before Reformation Sunday, with an option to use that observance to wrap everything up with one of the central tenets of the Reformation: the priesthood of all believers.

Remember that during the weeks of this emphasis we will be moving into the traditional season for talk about stewardship. Vocation is a powerful (and yet frequently overlooked) aspect of our stewardship. It will be helpful to consider how this emphasis is connected to your congregation’s fall stewardship plans.

In addition, during these weeks pay attention to the various parts of the liturgy that make connections to living the faith in our daily lives. The seasonal prayer after communion in *Sundays and Seasons* asks, “May your words come to life in our serving and in our witness, that we might speak a living voice of healing and justice to all the world.” You may want to rewrite the second half of such prayers (and other parts of the liturgy) to make more concrete connections, e.g., being more specific about what it means to be a “living voice of healing.”⁴

Visual reinforcement

If possible, hang large posters throughout the worship space of people participating in God’s work in their everyday lives. Use the ELCA’s tagline either on each poster, or as a poster itself in the midst of all the pictures. Many images are available on the web, or a photographer in your congregation might catch your people at work in their everyday lives. The types of pictures that might be used include the examples on the next page:



Post pictures of people involved in the everyday activities of life

Faith formation connections

This guide focuses on worship and does not offer specific guidance for possible connections to faith formation activities during this emphasis (i.e., Sunday school classes, confirmation, or adult classes). But don't let that stop you. Backing up what is happening in worship with faith formation activities will further equip your people for a life of faith. In particular, each week (below) calls for a time of checking in; part of that time involves telling stories from our lives. Since this ability to connect faith to life *and to talk about it* is not something a lot of people feel comfortable doing, using faith formation activities to name the connections and to practice telling our stories will make the worship experience easier and more meaningful.

Sunday, September 9

This is the recommended Sunday for congregation-wide “God’s Work. Our Hands.” activities. By all means move forward with planning and providing such service opportunities. This public witness to our baptismal call to serve our neighbors is important. Communicating that with your people is vital. At the same time, though, introduce the idea that living out our baptismal call to serve our neighbor goes beyond doing something extra on one Sunday each year; it also includes participating in God’s mission in the world in the activities and relationships of our everyday lives. This extended emphasis is our focus for the coming weeks.

The second reading for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 23) is James 1:17–27. The last sentence provides a solid textual basis: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” The scripture reading that accompanies the Small Catechism’s treatment of the fourth petition is helpful as well: John 6:8–13, the story of a boy who offers his basket of five barley loaves and two fish, by which thousands are fed, with an abundance left over.

In order to set the theme for both today’s day of service and the weeks ahead, focus on the Small Catechism, the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, where Luther says, “God gives daily bread without our asking, even to all evil people.” Luther continues, “What then does ‘daily bread’ mean?” The Catechism answers, “Everything our bodies need, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright workers, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” How does God provide this daily bread? Not through miraculous intervention like manna falling from heaven, but by farmers who plant and harvest the grain, bakers who turn flour into bread, warehouse workers and wholesale distributors, truck drivers, shelf stockers, and clerks at the checkout counter. Move beyond mere bread (food) and consider Luther’s long list of the other things our bodies need. How does God provide this “daily

bread”? God provides it through us, for the benefit of our neighbor. Indeed, God’s work happens through our hands, ordinary people loving and serving our neighbors in the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of our ordinary lives.⁵

Theological grounding: Lest anyone think we’re bordering on works righteousness, be clear about justification and works. Luther insisted that justification is a free gift of God’s grace apart from human works. But while justification is the total restoration of our relationship with God, it is at the same time something more: a transformation of our relationships with others. For Lutherans, justification is *freedom from* sin and brokenness and it is *freedom for* loving our neighbor. Because Christ set us free from everything that separates us from God, eliminating the need to earn God’s favor, we are free to focus instead on what our neighbor needs.

While Luther was dead-set against works righteousness (doing good things to earn favor with God), he was equally insistent that good works have a role in the life of a Christian: good works exist for the earth and one’s neighbor, not for eternity and God. God does not need our good works, Luther said, but our neighbor does.⁶ Luther’s view was bidirectional: faith moves life’s center from earth to heaven, but love moves life’s center from heaven to earth, specifically for our neighbor.⁷

The sending: As worshipers leave (perhaps you could beef up the sending liturgy at the end of the service to include this), distribute “God’s Work. Our Hands.” wristbands, and challenge people to wear the wristbands throughout the week. When they notice the wristband during the week, ask them to observe what their hands are doing, and how God might be at work for the benefit of the people they are interacting with at the moment. Let them know that there will be opportunities to share stories of their hands participating in God’s work on behalf of their neighbor in the coming weeks.

Sunday, September 16

Before you get into the focus for this week, consider how you might collect and share stories from your members in connection with their wristbands. You might want to talk with a few people before worship to see if they have stories they’d be willing to share or to let you share on their behalf. If possible, before worship begins (what better “announcement” could you hope for?) have a brief time for checking in: “We sent you out last week to love and serve God by loving and serving your neighbor. How did it go?” This week you might be the one sharing stories from others, or calling up people you talked to ahead of time. In future weeks we would hope that people would be freed up by the examples of others to speak spontaneously. An appropriate segue to confession would be noting that there were failures to love and serve our neighbors, and for that we seek God’s forgiveness. You may even want to rewrite the confession so that it makes specific references to the prior week’s theme.⁸

The gospel for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 24) is Mark 8:27–38. What better passage do we need? “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Our people know this passage well. They know that we are called to lose our life for Christ’s sake, and for the gospel, but what does that really mean—especially if (for the time being) we exclude those “sacrifices” that we make for the church?

The Small Catechism focus for this week is the Fourth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.” In particular, focus on the phrase that follows “but instead.” Our “neighbor” in this commandment is our parents and (as Luther includes) “others in authority.” In addition to not angering or despising them, we are called to “honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.” How are we called to lose our life for these neighbors (parents and others in authority) whom God has placed in our everyday lives? The Catechism’s scripture reading for this commandment is Luke 2:41–52, Jesus making his parents anxious at the temple; that may be helpful for this conversation.

How does God's work take place through our hands as we honor, serve, obey, love, and respect our parents and others in authority? In preparing for this week's sermon, talk to some members about how they do this, and what God might be doing in their midst. Ask permission to share their stories, if appropriate. The more concrete you can make this commandment in your sermon, with real-world stories, the better.

Before worship is over (again, the sending would be an appropriate time) remind your people to continue wearing their wristbands (and give wristbands to those who were not present on the prior Sunday). Feel free to move beyond the standard "Go in peace, serve the Lord." Include themes from earlier in worship, like, "Go in peace to honor and respect those in authority."

Sunday, September 23

Once again, consider including a time of checking in at the beginning of worship. Depending on your context, you might want to talk privately with a few people before worship about their wristband stories. This time you might ask one or two of your more extroverted members to share a story at the appropriate time.

The gospel for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 25) is Mark 9:30–37. The last three verses are especially appropriate for this emphasis, Jesus taking a child in his arms and encouraging his followers to be servants of all. What does it mean to be a "servant of all"? ...especially if we focus not on activities in or through our congregation but in our daily lives. How have those wristbands reminded us that even in the most humble of acts we are God's hands at work, providing daily bread for our neighbors? (A flashback to September 9 would be appropriate.)

The Small Catechism focus for this week is the Fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder," especially the phrase that follows "but instead." Sure, we shouldn't "endanger or harm the lives of our neighbors," but when and how do we "help and support them in all of life's needs"? Again, real-life stories from your life and/or your members' lives would be helpful. In order to make the connection that God is at work in the most humble of acts you might consider showing a video like these: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WUtcTZM768> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaWA2GbcnJU>

As in previous weeks, before worship is over, remind people to keep wearing their wristbands (give them to people who don't yet have one) and to use them as a reminder to pause and reflect on how their hands in the mundane activities of life are actually participating in God's work for our neighbor.

Sunday, September 30

As in prior weeks, consider including a time of checking in at the beginning of worship. You still might need to ask one or two of your more extroverted members to share a story at the appropriate time, or perhaps you can rely on volunteers.

The gospel for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 26) is Mark 9:38–50. Verse 41 is appropriate, "Truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." The Small Catechism focus for this week is the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." [NOTE: the gospel reading for next week is on marriage; you might want to consider the Seventh Commandment this week and the Sixth Commandment next week.] This is the only commandment in the second table for which Luther does not follow a negative-but-instead-positive pattern. While there is no "but instead," what is more salient is that there is no negative instruction; the whole explanation is a positive action: "lead pure and decent lives," and "love and honor our spouse." The Catechism's scripture reading for the Sixth Commandment (2 Samuel 11) provides a very strong negative example (David and Bathsheba) for this commandment, and could be used effectively. Luther sticks with the reality that we "fear and

love God” (i.e., we participate in God’s work) by leading lives worthy of God’s love. Once again, it will be important to ground this commandment and Luther’s explanation with concrete examples. How might you lift up examples of people leading pure and decent lives? Is there a news story that you could tell? Talking with your people about this during the days prior to Sunday might yield some shareable stories.

Again, conclude worship with references to the day’s theme. (e.g., “Go in peace. Be God’s hands at work by leading pure and decent lives.”) Remind worshipers to let their wristbands serve as reminders to reflect on how the work of their hands is God’s provision of daily bread for the neighbors with whom we will interact.

Sunday, October 7

We hope it has become a habit now to include a time of checking in at the beginning of worship. As always, a reminder that we were sent to love our neighbor (last week by leading pure and decent lives) is in order; the question “How did it go?” will be appropriate. Time for people to share stories is helpful to making this concrete. Failures to lead pure and honorable lives provide a sound segue to the confession.

The gospel for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 27) is Mark 10:2–16. While this text focuses a great deal on marriage (and may have fit better last week), the second part of the reading (13–16) is appropriate, especially v. 15, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” The kingdom of God that Jesus keeps talking about (there are over 100 references to it in the synoptic gospels!) isn’t just a heavenly reward, it’s a way of life—in this world. And while this way of life is marked by many characteristics, in today’s gospel it’s a matter of being like a child; it’s matter of humility, trust, and reliance on God.

We might want to take issue with Jesus on this particular metaphor. We know that children can be utterly and brazenly selfish and self-centered. Siblings often fight like cats and dogs; they want the toy that the other has; they compare themselves to their sibling(s) and wind up with a damaged sense of self-esteem. All of this, though, sounds like us. And that’s where the Small Catechism focus for this week comes in: the Seventh Commandment, “You shall not steal.” The Catechism’s scripture reading for this commandment (Joshua 7:1) is a worthy warning against our childish misbehavior.

The answer to “What does this mean?” in this commandment’s case is thorough in its proscriptions, and the answer provides concrete examples of ways in which we are called to deny our childish selves. But again, the focus of this series is on that which follows the “but instead.” In our interactions with our neighbors (those with whom we come in contact throughout the week) we are called to “help them to improve and protect their property and income.” We are called to tap into our better understanding of being a child: acting out of humility, trust, and reliance on God.

In particular, how do we “fear and love God” (i.e., participate in God’s work) by helping our neighbor improve and protect their livelihood? In this case, “our neighbor” increases dramatically to include not only those with whom we come in contact face-to-face, but people throughout our community, our nation, and around the world. How do we vote? To protect our own livelihood? What are we doing for the environment? Do our actions and interest undermine or improve and protect other people’s welfare? Leading a small group conversation on questions like these prior to writing a sermon will have a powerful impact and likely will provide relevant stories that can be shared to make this concrete for your people.

Conclude worship with references to the day’s theme. (e.g., “Go in peace. Be God’s hands at work by helping those you meet improve and protect their livelihood.”) Urge the use of the wristbands to remind people to look for God’s activity in the work of their hands.

Sunday, October 14

Begin worship with a time of checking in. Revisit last week's theme and seek out wristband stories. Follow up with confession. An adaptation of the absolution that announces that we are *freed from* all that separates us from God, which frees us *for* loving our neighbors would be a great segue to a hymn of praise.

The gospel for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 28) is Mark 10:17–31. While this provides a great reference to the Ten Commandments, the follow-up to “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth” does not align well with the Eighth Commandment. Perhaps you could focus only on vv. 17–20, checking with your people to see if v. 20 reflects their sensibilities. Checking the sense that “we, too, have kept all the commandments” against all the stories from the prior weeks might provide plenty of material.

Then again, v. 23 reintroduces the concept of the kingdom of God: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Most of our people likely equate the kingdom of God to heaven. But what if (see last week) the kingdom of God is not just a heavenly reward, but a way of life—in this world? What parts of living into Jesus' teaching [rejecting reliance on possessions for one, but also trust and humility (last week), trusting God to take our small daily acts (mustard seed and yeast, Luke 13) and turn them into big, worthwhile things] prevent us from being part of Jesus' “kingdom” in the here and now?

The Small Catechism focus for this week, the Eighth Commandment, is part of this kingdom life: coming to our neighbors' defense, speaking well of our neighbor and interpreting everything they do in the best possible light. Perhaps this week's “real life” stories could be told via current movie or TV show storylines. The Catechism's scripture reading for this commandment (Luke 22:54–62) relates Peter's denial of Jesus—Peter missed his opportunity to come to Jesus' defense, or even to speak well of him. How do our missed opportunities keep us from living the kingdom life of shalom: health, wholeness, restoration, and harmony?

As usual, conclude worship with references to the day's theme. (e.g., “Go in peace. Be God's hands at work by speaking well of others.”) Even though we're getting near the end of the series, urge the continued use of the wristbands to remind people to look for God's activity in the work of their hands. Engage people in conversation during the week about their wristband stories and encourage them to share those stories.

Sunday, October 21

This is the final opportunity to look for and share wristband stories. Hopefully it's become second nature by now. Follow up with confession and absolution.

The gospel for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 29) is Mark 10:35–45. At first glance, there seems to be little connection with the theme of coveting in the last two commandments (see below). It is true that James and John are guilty of coveting: they want the best seats in the house for themselves. Maybe there's material to work with there.

In order to make the Ten Commandments fit, it will be necessary to do as the Jewish Talmud and Reformed Christians do—combine what we call numbers 9 & 10 into one commandment. (Really, it's not much of a stretch!) Coveting is the theme, whether it's a house and possessions or a spouse. As usual, focus on what comes after “but instead”... help our neighbors keep what is theirs, and urge spouses and workers to remain loyal.

On the other hand, today's gospel might make a fitting end to the series: James and John thought that Jesus' kingdom was going to come in a brilliant tactical move that would destroy worldly powers and usher in paradise. And they wanted a front row seat! The kingdom that we have consistently heard Jesus describe, though, is nothing like that. It's subversive. It's humble. It's hidden

in the small and insignificant—including the small and insignificant actions, relationships, and responsibilities of our everyday lives.

A flashback to last week’s gospel might be appropriate: “Teacher, I have kept all these [commandments] since my youth.” We’re not perfect. We haven’t kept all the commandments (or Luther’s positive or negative explanations), but the stories we’ve been telling these past few weeks are indicative of the fact that we have, indeed, been striving to keep the commandments throughout our lives. In the work of our hands, in our everyday relationships, in our lives as citizens, we have been providing daily bread for our neighbors, be they family members, the people next door, coworkers, fellow citizens, even creation itself. Luther concludes the explanation to the Ten Commandments with a word of grace: “God promises grace and every good thing to all those who keep these commandments.” Or, to put this in the terms Jesus used with the scribe who knew that loving God and loving neighbor was more important than all of our offerings and sacrifices: “[We] are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:33–34)

Send the people on their way. Having expressed their love for God in worship, their neighbors are waiting to experience that same love and grace. This is the rhythm of our lives as Christians.

Sunday, October 28—Reformation Sunday

Having spent several weeks in the Small Catechism and how it applies to our daily lives, you may want to consider focusing your Reformation observance on Luther’s emphasis on the priesthood of all believers.

The final sentence of the gospel reading for Reformation Sunday is appropriate: “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). This would be a perfect opportunity to revisit the *freedom from* and *freedom for* theme that was addressed on September 9 (above). See Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (footnote 6) and/or revisit the document listed in footnote 7.

1. Both quotes are from <https://www.elca.org/dayofservice>

2. This document arises out of the Life of Faith Initiative. See <http://lifeoffaith.info> for more information and for a large number of resources.

3. If needed, see Luke 10:25–37. “Who is my neighbor?” The bottom line of the parable is that it’s not a matter of who we should love and who we can ignore or reject; rather it is about how we are neighbors to everyone we encounter. See Eugene Edward Veith, *Working for Our Neighbor: A Lutheran Primer on Vocation, Economics, and Ordinary Life*. (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2016) 14–16.

4. See Laura Fanucci’s book, *To Bless Our Callings: Prayers, Poems, and Hymns to Celebrate Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), for many ways to lift up vocation in worship.

5. See Dwight DuBois’ book, *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), for more information and ideas on how to make the connection.

6. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), trans. and intro. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 84.

7. For more on this, download the *Theological Grounding for the Life of Faith Initiative*, by Craig Nesson, at <http://lifeoffaith.info>. It can be found near the bottom of the home page.

8. The confession for the fall provided in *Sundays and Seasons* is a good start for this emphasis. You might want to rewrite lines like “Reform us to be a church powered by love, willing to speak for what is right, act for what is just, and seek the healing of your whole creation” to “Change us so that our daily lives are marked by love, speaking for what is right, acting for what is just, and seeking the welfare of everyone we meet.”