

THE BIBLE AND OUR BODIES
A Worship Series in Six Parts
planned by Katherine Goerzen

We are created very good. Each of us individually and all of us together are created in the divine image. Our sexuality, our drive to be in meaningful relationships, our maleness and our femaleness, the core of our very being, reflect the very good image of our Creator God.

Yet this reality is not always proclaimed in our lives together, even within the church. We have failed to see the image of God within ourselves and within others. Our sexuality and bodies created very good have been put down, violated, abused. We have believed the lies that our culture tells us about what “true” beauty is, what “true” intimacy is, what “true” sexuality is. We have exchanged the truth of being created good, created equal, created beautiful, for the lies of our culture.

And if the culture is the only place that we ever hear about sexuality and intimacy, why do we expect that there would be anything counter cultural about the church's view and witness on sexuality? What witness would we have to offer to combat the devastating effects of the culture's view of sexuality and intimacy? Too often we have neglected to talk about our sexuality and the true meaning of intimacy within the church. We assume that this is something that only the young people need to hear, and so “the sex talk” is reserved only for conversations in the youth room. Yet sexuality and intimacy affect all of us: we are all sexual beings; we are all in need of intimate, meaningful, and fulfilling relationships with those around us. It is imperative that these conversations are taking place within the church.

I worry that many now assume that talking about “sexuality” within the church means only speaking to same-sex relationships and marriage. Yet sexuality encompasses so much more and greatly affects all of us! As our sexuality, our yearning for meaningful relationships, is such a vital part of who we are, I deeply believe that we should be having these conversations within the church!

We need worship language to reflect healthy and affirming sexuality. Our worship together needs to reflect and encourage healthy intimacy and healthy sexuality. That is why this series was written. This worship series begins the conversation of a holistic view of sexuality and is divided into 6 parts.¹

The first service focuses on a healthy view of sexuality and the body. It draws from the first creation account from Genesis 1 (Gen. 1:26-31), Psalm 139 (Ps. 139: 1-18), and the prologue to John's gospel (John 1:1-18). It is my hope to lay a foundation of belief that all of us are created in the image of

¹ It is intentional that same-sex covenanted relationships is not spoken to explicitly in this series to help stop the misunderstanding that “sexuality” only refers to same sex relationships.

our Creator God, who took on our flesh and came to dwell among us. From the very beginning, God has proclaimed that our bodies are very good, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that our maleness and femaleness is very good, and that both genders reflect God's good image.

The second service focuses on a holistic view of intimacy, and uses the story of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:1-18). We were created to be in intimate, meaningful, affirming relationships with other people, (parents, children, friends, siblings, spouses, etc.), as everyone needs to be loved and understood. It is God's good intention for all people to experience intimate relationships, regardless of whether one is single or married, young or old, male or female.

The third service focuses on the gift of singleness within the church and draws from the words of Paul (1 Cor. 7:25-35) and Jesus (Matt. 19:10-12), both of whom were single. Too often the church favors and is geared towards married couples (especially those with children). It's important to also affirm and celebrate the many single people who are a vital part of our church family. We should proclaim and teach that single people are whole, healthy, vibrant, sexual beings capable of and desiring intimate and meaningful relationships with others. We should model ways that communicate that singleness is “a valuable way of expressing God's love and working for God's kingdom.”²

The fourth service focuses on a calling for mutual love and respect within the marriage relationship, focusing on the household codes from Ephesians (Eph. 5:21-33) and Colossians (Col. 3:12-19) that call us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. I strongly believe that the authors of these epistles are moving us towards an egalitarian relationship between husband and wife, and not towards a domineering hierarchy, as many have believed and so abused these passages. A covenanted, loving, Christian marriage witnesses to the watching world of Christ's deep love for us. Within the marriage relationship, both the husband and wife are called to submit to one another, respect one another, and love each other as Christ has loved us.

The fifth service is a way to begin to break the silence on sexual abuse. This service is one of lament, but also allows for a time of anointing and for prayers of healing. The scripture is that of the rape of Tamar, from 2 Samuel 13, paired with Psalm 22 (which Christ spoke from the cross, as a way to remember that even Christ's body was not spared from abuse). It is vital to allow for space to lament the pain of sexual abuse, to allow space for prayers and anointing, and to break the silence too often perpetuated by the church.

2 Julie Nash, “The Gift and Singleness,” in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 114. This chapter, along with Sue L. Conrad's chapter on celibacy are helpful resources in preparing for a worship service on singleness.

The final service focuses on the church as the family of God (Col. 3:12-17 and Mark 3:31-35). The church is the place where we should be able to experience our most meaningful and intimate relationships. All are welcome as beloved children of God and sisters and brothers in Christ.

I think that it is important to pair a worship series like with space for conversations afterwards. It would be good to pair this with faith formation that also seeks to affirm healthy sexuality. I would hope that anyone would be welcome to join in these conversations, especially as preaching is so one-sided.

I highly recommend 2 resources: the *Body and Soul* packet which includes a worship series and guides for conversations with different age groups within the church (for children, youth, and adults). I would also highly recommend *Sexuality: God's Gift* edited by Anne Krabill Hershberger as another vital resource, as it speaks well to so many aspects of our sexuality. Both of these amazing resources played a large role in shaping this worship series.

It is my hope that the church will begin to talk about sexuality more openly, that we will allow ourselves to be vulnerable with each other, and that we will begin to listen with the intent to understand each other. May the church be a safe place to have these conversations. May the church proclaim the true beauty and gift of our God-given sexuality. May the church proclaim the worth of all as being created in the image of God. May our lives together reflect the the goodness of our bodies and our sexuality. May our relationships together witness to the love of the God in whose good image we are created. May it be so.

Worship Service 1: Created in God's Good Image
Healthy Sexuality and Body Theology

Sexuality defines who we are at the very core of our being. It refers to our maleness, our femaleness, our bodies, our attractions, our creativity. It drives us to be in intimate and meaningful relationships with other people. Our sexuality is created “very good” and is a gift of God.

Yet, like most good gifts from God, our sexuality has become distorted within the wider culture and within the church. Some have viewed our sexuality as a weakness, a necessary evil used only for procreation. Some have viewed our sexuality as something to exploit within others, within those who are less powerful, within those who are most vulnerable. Some have reduced our sexuality to genital sex, to bodily pleasure.

Likewise our bodies created in the very image of God and created good have been distorted and misrepresented by the wider culture and by the church. Some have reduced our bodies created “very good” to objects to sate our sexual desires. Our society has placed upon us unattainable ideals of what “true beauty” should look like. Some within the church, following the theology of early church fathers, have preached the false doctrine that only the spiritual realm is good and that our bodies are evil. Unfortunately we are still feeling the repercussions of this belief today.

Many within the church feel ashamed of our sexuality; it is often an uncomfortable topic to discuss. Many within the church feel uncomfortable within our bodies; we have been made to feel that we do not measure up to culturally imposed standards of beauty.

Yet “[o]f all people, we as believers ought to have the most positive attitude toward our bodies and toward our sexuality. We are the ones who know the God who made them. We who know God best should best reflect the true nature of human sexuality.”³

The purpose of this first worship service is to introduce the congregation to a healthy view of sexuality and a healthy view of our bodies, as we are created and proclaimed to be very good by the God who made us. This service focuses on the texts of the creation account from Genesis 1 where our bodies, our maleness and femaleness, and our sexuality are created very good by God; Psalm 139 which proclaims that our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made; and John 1 which tells the story of God taking on our flesh. All three texts testify to the goodness of our bodies and our sexuality, our maleness and femaleness, the core of our being. All three texts testify that we are holistically beautiful and deeply beloved.

3 Anne Krabill Hershberger and Willard S. Krabill, “The Gift,” in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 21.

CREATED IN GOD'S GOOD IMAGE

Focus Statement: All of us are created in the image of our Creator God who took on our flesh and came to dwell among us. From the very beginning, God has proclaimed that we are very good and that our bodies are fearfully wonderfully made.

Possible Visuals: Use images of people from around the world, being sure to include a diverse representation of age, race/nationality, status, and gender. Images should include individuals as well as groups of people, and could even include images of people from within your own congregation. This helps to remind us that God's good image resides in all people and that all bodies are inherently beautiful.

GATHERING AND PRAISING

Old Testament Reading Genesis 1:1, 26a, 27, 31a

In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ... So God created humankind in the divine image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them ... God saw everything that had been made, and indeed, it was very good."⁴

Gospel Reading John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a parent's only child, full of grace and truth.⁵

Call to Worship

One: Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk, in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest
good is the body for knowing the world

All: Good is the flesh that the Word has become

One: Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
feeling, perceiving, within and around,
good is the body, from cradle to grave,

All: Good is the flesh that the Word has become

One: Good is the body from cradle to grave,
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh

All: Good is the flesh that the Word has become

One: Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,

4 This is adapted from the NRSV translation. It has been changed to use gender inclusive language for God. As both males and females are created in the image of God, I feel that it is most appropriate to not assign gender to God, as God has both male and female attributes. Therefore to refer only to God as "he" seems to deny that I, as a woman, have that which is of God within myself. The first sentence was also adapted, using an alternate translation for the Hebrew, to attest to the idea that God has not stopped creating, but that God is still creating, still shaping, and still moving within the world. Another good translation of this text is from the Common English Bible (CEB translation) or the Inclusive Bible.

5 Again, from the NRSV, but changed to use gender inclusive language for God. These two Scripture passages at the beginning set the overall tone and theme for the entire worship service to come.

glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,
good is the body, for good and for God,
*All: Good is the flesh that the Word has become*⁶

Gathering Prayer

Creator God, you have created us to be very good. By your hands we are fearfully and wonderfully knit together in our mother's wombs. Come and breathe new life within us and within all who are gathered together this morning. Fill us with your life-giving Spirit. Recreate us anew in your divine image that our lives may continue to reflect your glory. In your name we pray, Amen.

Gathering Song(s)

HWB No. 46 *I sing the mighty power of God*

HWB No. 48 *All creatures of our God and King*

HWB No. 89 *For the beauty of the earth*

STJ No. 25 *When long before time*

*Open your eyes to the image of God*⁷

*Composer of the Universe*⁸

*Form us, Creator*⁹

Offering Our Gifts HWB 750

PROCLAIMING GOD'S STORY

Children's Focus

- It is important to tell children, from a young age, that they are created good and that their bodies are very good and capable of many amazing things.
- One focus would be to simply retell one of the creation account, such as a vivid retelling of God stooping down to lovingly form the first human being from the dust.
- Another focus would be to talk about how God lovingly knit each of them together before they were born, speaking to Psalm 139:13-14.
- Another option would be to simply show many different images of people and talk about how God's image is within each person and that there is something that is of God within each person.

Scripture Readings Psalm 139:1-14
Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31¹⁰
John 1:1-5, 9-14

Sermon

*Sermon Seeds:*¹¹

6 Text by Brian Wren based on Genesis 1:31, John 1:14, and John 14:23. I realize that some of the imagery used may be uncomfortable for some within the congregation, but it speaks to human experience and is not meant to be sexually provocative. Using such language can help us begin to celebrate the goodness of our bodies and that which our bodies are capable of, as well as not perpetuate squeamishness over something as innocent as a mother feeding her child (which unfortunately has become sexualized in our culture).

7 Adam M. L. Tice, *Woven Into Harmony 50 Hymn Texts*.

8 Adam M. L. Tice, *A Greener Place to Grow: 50 More Hymn Texts*.

9 Adam M. L. Tice, *Claim the Mystery: 50 More Hymn Texts*.

10 It is vital to use a translation that is gender inclusive, such as the Common English Bible or The Inclusive Bible, preferably to use a translation that doesn't use gendered language for God also. As both males and females are created in God's image, to limit God to one gender is to deny that which is of God within the other gender.

- There is parallel imagery within these texts: “in the beginning,” “darkness” and “light” imagery, we are created in God's image and God's own self took on our own image and flesh. It seems as though much could be done to weave the two texts together beautifully.
- One could also include the creation account from Genesis 2 and speak to the intimate relationship that our Creator has with us, as One who lovingly stooped to create a human being from the dust of the ground. The account from Genesis 2 uses much more intimate imagery than the infinite imagery used in the first account in Genesis 1.
- I would hope that this sermon would convey that, despite the ways that we have fallen short, the Bible, right at the beginning, proclaims the goodness of our bodies, and the goodness of our sexuality, and the goodness of our gender.
- It stands to reason that if both females and males are created in God's image, then God has both wonderfully masculine and wonderfully feminine qualities.
- One should include a broader definition of sexuality within the sermon, that is much more than just genital sex. Our sexuality defines who we are at the core of our being. Our sexuality shapes who we are as male and female. Our sexuality drives us to be in relationship with those around us. A very helpful resource on this is the first chapter by Anne Krabill Hershberger and Willard S. Krabill in *Sexuality: God's Gift*
- The text from John 1 is to speak to the idea that our flesh is so good that God's own self even took on our flesh and came to live among us. The divine took on our very image. Despite our brokenness, it is through our very flesh that God chose to be made known to the world.
- One must also speak to the way that, though our bodies are created good, we have at times denied the image of God within ourselves and within others and this is in large part due to the cacophony of messages we receive from the culture around us that we are not good enough or that those who are different from us are not good enough. We constantly sell ourselves short, we do not take care of our bodies, we critically judge our own bodies and others' bodies according to unrealistic standards of beauty imposed by the culture, we inflict pain on our bodies and others' bodies, we reduce bodies to mere objects, we deny the image of God within our enemies, and so on.

Response

All are invited to turn to your neighbors around you and to affirm the image of God within each of them, to affirm the goodness of their body and of who God has created them to be. As our bodies are indeed good and capable of much good, you are further invited to shake hands, hug, or extend the holy kiss to those around if you are both comfortable doing so.

Song(s) of Response

HWB No. 377	<i>Healer of our every ill</i>
HWB No. 485	<i>Mothering God, you gave me birth</i>
HWB No. 511	<i>God who touches earth with beauty</i>
HWB No. 556	<i>Lord, thou has searched me</i>
STJ No. 91	<i>Like a mother who has borne us</i>
STJ No. 92	<i>Just as I am, without one plea</i>
	<i>Quirky, queer, and wonderful¹²</i>
	<i>To love as God has first loved us¹³</i>

11 The sermon seeds in this series are written in a way that is helpful to me if I were going to preach. I hope that there is enough within them that others could find them helpful as well if this were ever to be viewed by others as a resource.

12 Adam M. L. Tice, *Claim the Mystery 50 More Hymn Texts*

13 Ibid

*As Breath swept over formless sea¹⁴
God sparks the human soul¹⁵
Every eye is different¹⁶
This is my body, holy and good¹⁷*

Congregational Prayer

Word made known in our flesh,

We praise you, for you have indeed created us very good. You have created us, as males and females, to bear your holy image. You have lovingly knit each of our bodies together in our mothers' wombs. From the very beginning when you first sang creation into being, you have proclaimed that we are very good.

You affirm the goodness of our bodies by taking on our flesh yourself and coming to dwell among us. You affirm our goodness when you came to us in human form and touched bodies and healed bodies and proclaimed the goodness and sacredness even of those whose bodies are often objectified, vilified, and violated.

It is a holy thing to reflect that we are made in your image, but we confess that there are times when we struggle to see your image within ourselves and within others. We confess that there are times when we abuse our bodies and the bodies of others. We confess that there are times when we deny your goodness within others and within ourselves.

Heal us of the blindness that prevents us from seeing your image within ourselves and within all of your beloved children. May your creative power that is at work within us continue to transform us to give us eyes to see and arms to embrace and hearts to love that which is of you in every person. Move in our hearts so that we can begin to let go of the lies that try to convince us that we are not good enough. Continue to remind us so that we may truly know and believe that we are fearfully and wonderfully made by your loving hands. Amen.

Sending Hymn(s)

HWB No. 50 *Praise the Lord, sing hallelujah*

HWB No. 71 *Joyful, joyful, we adore thee*

Benediction

Know that you are created good. Know that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Know that are created in the very image of our Creator God who took on our flesh and came to dwell among us. Go now in peace. Amen.

14 Adam M. L. Tice, *Stars Like Grace: 50 More Hymn Texts*

15 Ibid.

16 Adam M. L. Tice, *Woven Into Harmony: 50 Hymn Texts*

17 Adam M. L. Tice, *A Greener Place to Grow: 50 More Hymn Texts*

Worship Service 2: Created for Meaningful Relationships Healthy Intimacy

We were all created to be in meaningful and intimate relationships with one another.

Unfortunately, too often when we hear the word “intimacy,” we assume a sexual relationship; the language of “being intimate” with someone often is understood in reference to genital sex. But sex does not equal intimacy. To equate these two is to rob intimacy of its deepest meaning.¹⁸

Intimacy cannot be limited to relationships where sex is involved. Intimacy can be between siblings, between parents and children, with other relatives, with a spouse, with friends, with God. Intimacy is possible for all people, whether single or married, young or old, able-bodied or disabled. *Everyone* needs to be loved, to be understood, to be accepted.

“Intimacy is the unending marvel of understanding and being understood by another person.”¹⁹ Intimacy within a relationship is to have our thoughts, our feelings, our bodies, indeed our whole selves be respected for who we are. Intimacy is to be in a compassionate and supportive relationship with another person. Intimacy is achieved between people who trust each other; it takes a long time and it involves a lot of risks and vulnerability. Intimacy is created through open and honest communication, equality, trust, loyalty, and a deep commitment and love for the other person in the relationship.²⁰

The Bible has a number of stories of intimate relationships between people. For example, Jonathan and David experienced an intimate relationship with each other: “Jonathan loved [David] as his own soul.”²¹ Jesus formed an intimate relationship with a close group of disciples. The gospel of John refers often to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and says that “Jesus loved Martha and her sister.”²²

One of the most common wedding texts is “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”²³ But the quote is not said in the context of a romantic relationship. It is said by Ruth to Naomi, a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law; the context is the intimate, loving and meaningful relationship between two women. It is upon this story that this worship service focuses, along with Genesis 2:18, 21-23.²⁴

18 Willard S. Krabill, “The Gift and Intimacy,” in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 53.

19 Krabill, “The Gift and Intimacy,” 57.

20 See Krabill, “The Gift and Intimacy.”

21 1 Samuel 18:1b.

22 John 11:5.

23 Ruth 1:16b, NRSV.

24 This service is based heavily upon the worship service “Created for Intimacy” within the *Body & Soul* curriculum and worship resource. Many of the prayers, idea, indeed even the title are taken and adapted from this resource.

CREATED FOR MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Focus Statement: We were all created to be in intimate relationships with other people. This is God's good intention for all people, regardless of whether one is single or married, old or young, female or male.

Possible Visuals: Use images (pictures, artwork, small statues, etc.) of people embracing or talking together or spending time together (walking, having a meal, etc.). Once again include different ages, different ages, different genders, and you could also include images of people from within your own congregation. This is to help reinforce that intimacy is something that all people need.

GATHERING AND PRAISING

Old Testament Reading Genesis 2:18

Then the Lord said, "It is not good for the human creature to be alone. Therefore I will make a fitting companion for it."²⁵

Old Testament Reading Ruth 1:16b

"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Call to Worship

One: Come, worship the One who created us in our mothers' wombs –

Many: Who created us for one another.

One: Who reached into our fleshy bodies, removed a hard bone covering our heart, and made it into a neighbor, a sibling, a life partner.

Many: Who exposed our hearts to longing, to needing, to desiring re-union.

One: Come, worship the One who covenants to stay by our side, to go with us wherever we will go.

Many: Who will not forsake us, who is closer than a lover.

One: Let us worship together as friends who need one another, as brothers and sisters of one family.

Many: Let us share in one another's joys and sorrows.

All: Let us give thanks for God's steadfast, abiding love.

Gathering Prayer

God of Adam and Eve, Ruth and Naomi, You have made us for one another, and our bodies ache for intimacy. You have given us your sure, unwavering covenant; we long to know that we will be accompanied our whole life long by one who loves us. You have placed us in community. We look for genuine love that holds fast to what is good in each of us. Meet us now in this time of worship. Gather us in and hold us close, we pray. Amen.²⁶

Gathering Song(s)

HWB No. 6	<i>Here in this place</i>
HWB No. 89	<i>For the beauty of the earth</i>
HWB No. 363	<i>Renew your church</i>
STJ No. 4	<i>You've got a place</i>
STJ No. 16	<i>Praise with joy the world's Creator</i>

25 Adapted from the translation in the Inclusive Bible. This bases its translation on the understanding that "Adam," which represents every person, was genderless until the woman was created, hence the neutral language for the human.

26 The Call to Worship and Gathering Prayer are from the second worship service of *Body & Soul: Worship Leader Guide*. It is well written and an excellent resource for any congregation.

STJ No. 39
STS No. 102

Where true love (Ubi Caritas)
Well met, dear friends

Offering Our Gifts *Words for Worship 2, No. 143*

PROCLAIMING GOD'S STORY

Children's Focus

- One could ask children who they love and what is it about these relationships that they enjoy.
- One could read a book illustrating a good relationship, such as between two friends or between family members. Or read a children's book with Ruth and Naomi.
- *Body & Soul* suggests cutting out a paper doll chain and connecting them with paper clips to symbolize how God created us to be in good relationships with others.
- The *Circle of Grace* curriculum also includes some ideas on what it means to form healthy and meaningful relationships.

Scripture Readings Genesis 2:18-25
Ruth 1:1-18

Sermon

Sermon Seeds:

- This sermon should include a definition of intimacy that is more holistic and more in keeping with God's good intentions for creation in contrast to the common understanding of intimacy as related to genital sex within the wider culture. Sex is certainly a good and pleasurable gift when within the context of a committed, monogamous, covenanted relationship, but it is only one part of a much bigger whole. Highly recommended is the chapter on intimacy by Willard Krabill in *Sexuality: God's Gift* which includes a definition of intimacy as well as what types of characteristics make up an intimate relationship.
- Genesis 2 proclaims that we are created to be in relationship with each other. It is not good for us to be alone. From the very beginning, we are meant to be companions to each other, helpers for each other, and partners to each other.
- God is, at God's core, a set of relationships. Our lives together display God's image within our relationships.
- Often part of this text from Ruth is read at weddings. That is certainly appropriate for a committed, covenanted relationship. But the original context of these beautiful words is within the loving friendship of two women, a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law.
- These women are from different nations and different generations. Naomi, an Israelite, had recently lost her husband and her two sons. Ruth, a Moabite, journeys with her after her great loss, companionship her, offering strength and comfort following this bitter loss.
- Our sexuality, created good, is what drives us to be in intimate relationships with one another. This is vital for all human beings, regardless of age or gender or life experiences. All desire a deep connection with others. All need compassionate and meaningful relationships. This is a part of God's good intention for creation.

Response

You are invited to take a moment to silently reflect on the intimate relationships that you have in your life (this could be with a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a friend). Who is it who knows and understands who you are? Who has journeyed with you through your joys and sorrows? What makes these relationships special? What do you appreciate about the people who you experience intimacy with?

You are invited to pray a prayer of thanksgiving for the meaningful relationships that God has placed in your life.

Song(s) of Response

HWB No. 362	<i>Help us to help each other</i>
HWB No. 492	<i>God of Eve and God of Mary</i>
STJ No. 38	<i>Beloved, God's chosen</i>
STJ No. 52	<i>Jesus, help us live in peace</i>
STJ No. 56	<i>Make me a channel of your peace</i>
STJ No. 87	<i>Put peace into each other's hands</i>
STS No. 117	<i>How can I say</i> <i>Jesus, Love Incarnate</i> ²⁷ <i>Love Is the Song</i> ²⁸ <i>Wishing You Well</i> ²⁹

Congregational Prayer

God, you who created us and know us intimately,

We thank you for the many people, friends, family, lovers, neighbors, children, you have placed within our lives. We thank you for intimate and meaningful relationships that have enriched us, changed us, and have made us who we are today.

(Prayer Requests)

We also lament for those who know little intimacy, compassion, and respect from others. We lament for the times and places in our lives when we ourselves are lonely; even when we are surrounded by crowds of people, surrounded by activity, surrounded by Twitter “followers” or Facebook “friends”, there are still times when we experience a profound sense of loneliness. We lament for estranged relationships with family and friends. We ache for children we had hoped for but never bore. We miss those dear to us who live far away. We mourn loved ones who have died. Our busyness does not fill the void. Our hyper-connectedness through technology does not complete the picture.

We long for intimacy in our lives. We desire to know and be known. Teach us, O God, the love that satisfies. Open us to receive one another and learn the way of intimate friendship, your way of love, for you have created us for one another. Teach us, O God, the deepness of your intimate love for each of us, as beloved daughters and sons in your family. We pray in your name, Amen.³⁰

Sending Hymn(s)

HWB No. 420	<i>Heart with loving heart</i>
HWB No. 421	<i>Bless'd be the tie that binds</i>
STJ No. 73	<i>The Lord lift you up</i>
STS No. 57	<i>Go, my friends, in grace</i>

Benediction

A blessing on each friendship.

A blessing on each couple.

A blessing on each one who joins with another one

²⁷ Adam M. L. Tice, *Stars Like Grace: 50 More Hymn Texts*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bryan Moyer Suderman, from the album *I'm glad you're here*

³⁰ Adapted from the prayer of lament in the second worship service in *Body & Soul: Worship Leader Guide*.

to go where the other goes, to be where the other will be.
May you find in this bond the very face of God. Go in peace.³¹

31 Taken from the second worship service in *Body & Soul: Worship Leader Guide*. It is a fitting and lovely sending which ties together all of the themes of the service.

Worship Service 3: The Gift of Singleness Singleness within the church

There seems to be a prevalent belief within the Mennonite church (and the wider church as well) that people can only be whole, vibrant, sexual beings if they are in a dating or marriage relationship. If someone is single, we assume that marriage is their goal and we subtly or blatantly ask them about their dating relationships and/or prospects. When we encounter a single person who is in her or his late 20's or older, many wonder what could possibly be “wrong” with them as they have not yet found “the one.”

All of us are single at some point in our lives, as children and teenagers, as widows and widowers, or throughout our lives. Some choose to remain or become single. Some have singleness thrust upon them through the loss of a spouse or due to never finding a person to marry.

Marriage seems to be the expected outcome for all people, especially within the church. Many church structures are organized around couples and families. But the church as the family of God should be the place where all people, regardless of whether they are single or married, should feel the most welcomed. We should affirm and celebrate the many single people who are a vital part of our church family. We should proclaim and teach that single people are whole, healthy, vibrant, sexual beings capable and desiring of intimate and meaningful relationships with others. We should model ways that communicate that singleness is “a valuable way of expressing God's love and working for God's kingdom.”³²

Two of the most important figures of the New Testament were single: Jesus was single and Paul was single and encouraged others to remain as he was. This service focuses on words from both Jesus and Paul (from Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7) and seeks to communicate that singleness is a gift to the church, as those who are single are able to serve God and the church more fully than those who are married. This service also seeks to communicate that single people are a vital part of the family of God and that we affirm their sexuality, their desires for relationship, and them for who they are as beloved sons and daughters created in God's image.

32 Julie Nash, “The Gift and Singleness,” in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 114. This chapter, along with Sue L. Conrad's chapter on celibacy are helpful resources in preparing for a worship service on singleness.

THE GIFT OF SINGLENES³³

Focus Statement: Paul proclaims: "Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind." All within the church are a vital part of the family of God, whether single or married, young or old, male or female. We affirm that those among us who are single have many gifts to offer the church, including their singleness itself.

Possible Visuals: Visuals could include artwork or images of Jesus with his disciples. Or visuals could focus on items that represent the many spiritual gifts bestowed by the Spirit (such as a loaf of bread to symbolize hospitality, or a basin and a towel to symbolize service). Or one could ask single people from every age group to bring visuals or pictures that represent where they are in their journey with singleness. Or one could use the visuals from the previous Sunday which focused on intimate relationships within the church.

GATHERING AND PRAISING

New Testament Reading 1 Corinthians 7:7

Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind

Call to Worship

One: For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,
so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually
we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:

prophecy, in proportion to faith;

ministry, in ministering;

the teacher, in teaching;

the exhorter, in exhortation;

the giver, in generosity;

the leader, in diligence;

the compassionate, in cheerfulness.³⁴

Many: In our worship we recognize that all who gather here bring gifts given by the Spirit

One: We recognize and proclaim that all are vital members of the family of God,

whether we are single or married,

old or young,

female or male.

We recognize that all gifts and all lives build up the body of Christ

All: We come to worship the One who binds us together as sisters and brothers in the family of God

Gathering Prayer

Parent of us all, we come today to worship you, recognizing that you have created each of us as whole, healthy, vibrant and sexual beings in need of fulfilling relationships with those around us. We praise you for the many relationships that we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ. May we continue to

33 This was a difficult worship service to put together. Singleness is a difficult topic to address, and I was not able to find many resources for worship services revolving around this theme. Everyone experiences singleness differently and I hope to be sensitive to the many different feelings and experiences surrounding this. Even with the title itself, I recognize that not everyone would see their singleness as a gift.

34 Adapted from Romans 12. However, 1 Corinthians 12 could also be used to be in keeping with the 1 Corinthians 7 passage.

build each other up, regardless of our status in life, recognizing that all are a vital part of our church family. In your name we pray, Amen.

Gathering Song(s)

HWB No. 304	<i>There are many gifts</i>
STJ No. 4	<i>You've got a place</i>
STJ No. 54	<i>Longing for light</i>
STJ No. 64	<i>Somos el cuerpo de Cristo</i>
STJ No. 92	<i>Just as I am, without one plea</i>
STS No. 55	<i>Love the Lord your God</i>

Offering Our Gifts *Words for Worship, No. 222*

PROCLAIMING GOD'S STORY

Children's Focus

- One could focus on the different gifts that everyone brings (using either 1 Corinthians 12 or Romans 12). Ask the children what gifts they see in others that are being used in the church. What gifts to they see in themselves? How can they use their gifts this week?

Scripture Readings Matthew 19:10-12
1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 25-35

Sermon

Sermon Seeds:

- This would need to be a sermon well thought through. Many experience singleness in different ways. Some choose to be single. Some are single, though they do not wish to be.
- Many experience singleness at different ages and all of us are single at some point in our lives. How do we address the singleness and sexuality of children? How do we address the singleness and sexuality of teenagers? How do we address the singleness and sexuality of young adults? How do we address the sexuality of single adults? How do we address the singleness and sexuality of widows and widowers? Too often we assume that those who are single are asexual (save for teenagers and young adults, but even then we sometimes try to stifle their sexuality). Yet it is important to remember that each of these persons is in need of fulfilling, meaningful, and intimate relationships.
- How do we allow for single people to be a part of the church family when so many of our church structures assume couples? Some of our church councils assume that couples will serve together. How many chairs do we set around fellowship tables? What type of language for “family” do we use?
- We tend to hold marriage as the expectation for all people, yet for the first 1,000 years of the church, singleness and celibacy was considered the higher calling. It is also important to reflect that many important people within Scripture were not married: Mary and Martha, Simeon and Anna, Paul (who also encouraged others to remain single), and Jesus himself.
- People who are single can offer the gift of being able to minister and serve God and the church more fully. It is important to affirm this gift (recognizing that some who are single may not see this as a gift or may never have considered this as a spiritual gift).
- We assume that marriage is the “norm” but neither Jesus nor Paul held up either as more or less important. Paul did encourage people to remain single, which may have been tied to his imminent eschatology, but he did not discredit the importance of marriage relationships either.

- Jesus was single and surrounded himself with a close group of intimate friends and disciples (some of whom were married (Peter had a mother-in-law), some of whom were single (John, Mary and Martha)). Jesus also taught that in the resurrection, marriage will no longer be practiced (Matthew 22:30).
- Within this sermon it is vital to express that single people are whole, vibrant, healthy, sexual beings in need of intimate relationships with others. In the church, in the family of God, it is vital that we form these intimate relationships with people regardless of whether they are married or single and that we create a welcoming space for all.

Response

Consider asking one or two people from your congregation who are single to share about their experience as a single person. How has their singleness and sexuality been received within the church? How have they formed meaningful and intimate relationships with others? How has their singleness allowed them to serve God? What would they like their brothers and sisters within the congregation to know?

Song(s) of Response³⁵

HWB No. 389	<i>Take my life</i>
STJ No. 34	<i>Loving Spirit</i>
STJ No. 72	<i>One is the Body</i>
STJ No. 100	<i>Here I am</i>
STS No. 35	<i>Thou, O Christ, my Lord and King</i>
STS No. 49	<i>I will come to you in the silence</i>
STS No. 111	<i>For me to live is Christ</i>

Congregational Prayer

Giver of all good gifts and relationships,

We thank you for each person gathered here today. In our lives together, may we proclaim that all people are important members of the household of God, whether we are single or married, young or old, male or female. We recognize that each person brings gifts and value to your Body, the church.

We remember that all of us are single at some point in our lives and yet we confess that too often we have believed that marriage is the expected way of life for all people. We confess that we do not always know how to respond to those who are single within the church. We confess that there are times when our words and our actions and our questions have been hurtful, whether we intended them to be or not. Forgive us for times when we forget or deny the sexuality of those who are single, whether as young children, young adults, widows and widowers, or adults who have been single for their entire lives.

We recognize that there are many conflicting emotions about singleness. Some have willingly chosen to remain single and celibate. Some have had singleness thrust upon them. We recognize that some would not see their singleness as a gift. We lament for those who have endured the deep pain of the loss of a beloved spouse. We lament for those who have deeply desired to be married and yet never have been.

May our lives together create a space where all are welcome and valued and where all can receive meaningful and intimate relationships within your church. May we seek to love and embrace all of your beloved children. In your name we pray, Amen.

³⁵ I could not find any songs that specifically address singleness. Some of these focus on the Body of Christ and the gifts that we offer. Some of these focus on our commitment to Christ.

Sending Hymn(s)**HWB No. 420***Heart with loving heart***HWB No. 421***Bless'd be the tie that binds***STJ No. 63***Lord, you give the great commission***STJ No. 80***Christ be near at either hand***Benediction**

Go from this place, knowing that you are beloved, regardless of your status, and that each of you have meaningful gifts to offer the church. May we affirm the callings and gifts of those around us, whether we are female or male, young or old, single or married. Thanks be to God for the many gifts and life experiences that the Spirit bestows!

Go in peace.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**Singleness Prayers from *Praying like a Woman* by Nicola Slee***A single woman's manifesto*

I want to be single and not considered sexless,
frigid from the neck downwards,
lacking in passion and sensuality.

I want to be single and not treated as dysfunctional,
pitied as unlovable, unchoosable, unhaveable.

I want to be single and not rendered invisible,
ignored in restaurants, passed over in advertisements, relegated to the small print by travel agents.

I want to be single and not regarded as infantile, incomplete, or lacking in humanity,
'still searching' for the perfect partner, 'still waiting' for life to begin.

I want to be single and not assumed instantly available,
able to drop whatever I'm doing to respond to others' more pressing and immediate needs.

I want to be single and not presumed timid, unadventurous or innocent,
having my hunger for life and fullness diminished by Church and society's narrowness.

I want to be single and not have my needs considered insignificant,
assumed that I will be content with hand-me-downs, second-hand bargains
and someone else's cast-offs.

I want to be single and not have my friendships belittled,
considered less important than partnerships or less committed than romantic relationships.

I want to be single and have my capacity for parenthood recognized,
my need for nurturing and cherishing others validated, my skills in caring and growing lives celebrated.

I want to be single and not denied ritual, story and liturgy
to celebrate my choices and my struggles, the milestones and the markers of my life's journey.

I want to be single in a church and a culture which celebrates diversity and distinctiveness,
solidarity in difference, friendship across otherness.

I want to be single.

A litany of prayer and praise for being single

For the pleasure of solitude
and for the pain of loneliness

For the freedom for many friendships
and for the fragility of those bonds

For the luxury of spaciousness
and for the privation of boundlessness

For the joys of independence
and for the burden of choice

For the intensity of the undiluted emotion
and for the anguish of the overwhelming feeling

For the clarity of single-mindedness
and for the uncertainty of going it alone

For the energy of freely chosen action
and for the exhaustion of carrying it through unaided

For the fruitfulness of imagination, mind and soul
and for the barrenness of body

For the delight of nurturing others
and for the distress when those connections are invisible,
those ties unacknowledged

For the freedom from the constraints of coupling
and for the oppression of living in a society where coupledness rules

For the blessing and the bane of the single lot
its happiness and hurting
its ecstasy and anguish
its freedom and its fetters
its pleasures and privations

I yield my thanks
I make my pledge
I give my 'Yes'

Worship Service 4: The Witness of Marriage
Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ

Our marriage relationships are to witness to the deep love and commitment that Christ has for the church. Loving, covenanted marriage relationships, where both the wife and the husband receive respect, trust, and fidelity, are important witnesses to the watching world where so many marriages are filled with pain and brokenness and end in divorce.

Many marriages experience less than God's good intentions of fidelity, companionship, mutuality, and love within the wider culture and within the church. Divorce is no less prevalent within the church than it is within the wider society. Husbands and wives may feel distant from each other. People who have been married for years may feel that their spouse does not truly know who they are. Feelings of loneliness, false perceptions of intimacy, sexuality and beauty, and prior experiences of abuse may lead one spouse to seek companionship elsewhere. The society, the church, even the Bible itself have continued to convey beliefs that the husband is to be dominant and the wife submissive, thus leading some husbands to abuse their wives or children. These are but a few of the ways that people experience brokenness within their marriage relationships.

There are many ideas that a service on marriage could focus on, and unfortunately, one cannot touch on all of them in one service. One could focus on the the holiness and sanctity of marriage, on sexual intercourse outside of marriage, on divorce and other painful realities, or many other possibilities. But in keeping with the theme of relationships and intimacy, I have chosen to focus on our calling for mutual submission, love, and respect within marriage and within the church itself.

Perhaps the passage that I have chosen from the household codes in Ephesians 5 seems a bit shocking for a woman to choose, but I believe that the author of Ephesians is moving us towards an egalitarian relationship between husband and wife, and not towards a patriarchal relationship and domineering hierarchy, as many have believed. This worship service focuses on our mutual calling to love and respect our spouses, and to love each other with the same love that Christ has loved us. I have hopefully constructed the service in such a way that those who are not married will feel included as well.

THE WITNESS OF MARRIAGE

Focus Statement: Right before his exhortation to wives and husbands, Paul proclaims, “Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.” A covenanted, loving, Christian marriage witnesses to Christ's deep love for us. Within the marriage relationship, both the husband and wife are called to submit to one another, to respect each other, and to love each other as Christ has loved us.

Possible Visuals: Visuals could include typical visuals used in weddings such as flowers and unity candles. Or you could invite people from within the congregation to bring their own wedding pictures and use these as the focus.

GATHERING AND PRAISING

Old Testament Reading Genesis 2:22-24

The Lord fashioned the two halves into male and female, and presented them to one another. When the male realized what had happened, he exclaimed ... “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh! Now she will be Woman, and I will be Man, because we are of one flesh!” This is why people leave their parents and become bonded to one another, and the two become one flesh.³⁶

New Testament Reading Ephesians 5:21, 31-33

*Yield to one another out of reverence for Christ.
“This is why one person leaves home and clings to another, and the two become one flesh.”
This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. However, each of you should love your partner as yourself, with each showing respect for the other.³⁷*

Call to Worship

One: God is love and love comes from God. Every person who truly loves is a child of God

Many: **We cannot say we love God if we do not show compassion and love for others.**

If we love one another, then God actually lives within us

One: It is a wonderful yet fearful thing to choose to love.

There is a risk in offering who we are to others in love

Many: **Perfect love knows no fear. Fully developed love casts out all fear**

One: Love is slow to lose patience. It looks for a way of being constructive.

It is not possessive. It is neither anxious to impress
nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy.

It does not rejoice at wrong or gloat over the disasters that afflict other people.

On the contrary, it rejoices in the right and is glad for the good fortune of others.

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope;

it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the only thing that stands when all else has fallen

All: **In this life there are three great lasting qualities – faith, hope, and love.**

But the greatest of these is love³⁸

36 This translation is taken from the Inclusive Bible, for it strips away many of the patriarchal connotations that we sometimes tend to associate with this text.

37 Translation taken from the Inclusive Bible and the NRSV. Again, it strips away many of the patriarchal connotations within the text. I believe that there is patriarchy within the text of Ephesians 5 (The author probably never imagined another way was possible), but the text seems to move us beyond the demeaning patriarchy of its day to a relationship of love and respect. I believe that this translation better expresses the relationship that the author of Ephesians is encouraging.

Gathering Prayer HWB 740

Gathering Song(s)³⁹

HWB No. 259	<i>When I survey</i>
HWB No. 341	<i>Jesus loves me</i>
HWB No. 530	<i>What wondrous love is this</i>
HWB No. 592	<i>Love divine, all loves excelling</i>
HWB No. 593	<i>O Power of love</i>
HWB No. 625	<i>Your love, O God, has called us</i>

Offering Our Gifts *Words for Worship*, No. 225

PROCLAIMING GOD'S STORY

Children's Focus

- One could focus on what Jesus' love looks like and how we can model that in our lives (sharing what we have, being kind to others, being kind to those different from us or who are treated poorly)
- You could also ask someone to share about the ways he or she experience God's love within their marriage relationship
- One could also read a book on love

Scripture Readings Colossians 3:12-19⁴⁰ Ephesians 5:21-33

Sermon

Sermon Seeds:

- This text is often problematic to people within the church, particularly women. I don't know if I have ever heard a sermon preached on it before. This passage evokes stories of wives being dominated by husbands, and indeed, tragically, this text and others like it have “given permission” to some men to abuse their wives. But the text itself has no room for such a horrendous interpretation. This passage begins with a mutual calling to submission. The passage exhorts us to love each other in this way because a marriage relationship is to reflect the love that Christ has for the church. Christ would never ruthlessly abuse or dominate the church (or a woman for that matter).
- Though I believe that patriarchy is still within the text (as the author probably never envisioned that any other way of life was possible in a society where patriarchy was assumed), I believe that this text is beginning to move us towards a more equal relationship between women and men in the marriage relationship, one where mutual submission, respect, and love is at the heart

38 This is taken from a wedding service in *For All Who Minister* (Brethren Press, 1993). 1 Corinthians 13 is often a text used at weddings. However, this passage of Scripture was written to express the love that is found within the church. This love applies to all relationships within the church and speaks of our calling to mutual love and respect within our relationships. My hope is that this call to worship (and service in general) will not result in anyone feeling alienated, regardless of whether they are married or single.

39 As the Scripture passage speaks to loving one another as Christ loved us, you have the option of choosing songs at the beginning of the service that speak to Jesus' love for humankind.

40 Some other possible Scripture passages could include the Genesis reading from the beginning of the service, 1 Corinthians 7:1-6, Mark 10:6-9, 1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 3:16-21, Proverbs 10:18-19, Proverbs 31:10-31 (which is a song of praise Jewish husbands sing to their wives), or anything from the Song of Songs.

of the relationship. Especially if you compare this text to the secular household codes of the day.

- Ideas and thoughts from Rachel Held Evans' book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*. She writes:
 - “The question modern readers have to answer is whether the Greco-Roman household codes reflected upon in Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Peter are in and of themselves holy, or if their appearance in Scripture represents the early church's attempt to blend Christianity and culture in such a way that it would preserve the dignity of adherents while honoring prevailing social and legal norms of the day. The Christian versions of the household codes were clearly progressive for their time, but does that mean they have the last word, that Christians in changing places and times cannot progress further? ... For Christians the answer must be considered in light of Jesus, who made a habit of turning hierarchy on its head.”⁴¹
 - “Women should not have to pry equality from the grip of Christian men. It should be surrendered willingly, with the humility and love of Jesus, or else we miss the once radical teaching that slaves and masters, parents and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor, healthy and sick, should 'submit to one another' (Eph. 5:21).”⁴²
 - She ends her chapter with an eloquent section on why she respects her husband. It is because of the person who he is. Theirs is a relationship of mutual submission to one another.

Response

Consider inviting a husband and wife to share with the congregation about how they have experienced the love of Christ within their relationship. How have they grown in their faith because of their relationship? How have they been able to serve God together? How has God blessed and moved within their relationship? How has their understanding of God's love changed because of their marriage?

Song(s) of Response

HWB No. 307	<i>Will you let me be your servant</i>
HWB No. 362	<i>Help us to help each other</i>
HWB No. 542	<i>Holy Spirit, gracious Guest</i>
HWB No. 623	<i>When love is found</i>
HWB No. 624	<i>O perfect Love</i>
HWB No. 626	<i>Hear us now, O God our Maker</i>
	<i>The Dancing of a Hidden Fire</i> ⁴³
	<i>The Joyful Love We Witness Now</i> ⁴⁴
	<i>Love is the Song</i> ⁴⁵

Congregational Prayer

God, who loves us deeply,
You have created us to be in relationship with one another. You have called us to submit to one another, to respect one another, to love each other. Bless our relationships with each other, our

41 Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master,”* p. 218.

42 Ibid., 219.

43 Adam M. L. Tice, *A Greener Place to Grow: 50 More Hymn Texts*

44 Ibid.

45 Adam M. L. Tice, *Stars Like Grace: 50 More Hymn Texts*

relationships in the church, with our friends, with our children, with our siblings, with our parents, with our spouses. Create within us hearts to love as you love us.

Yet we confess that there are times when we do not love others as you love us. We confess that there are times when we do not allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We lament that there are times when our vulnerability and love is betrayed, unrequited, exploited. We lament for those who find themselves in relationships that are broken, breaking, or shattered. We confess the times when we have sought to dominate people we care about. We lament the times when we have been dominated by those we once trusted.

Send your healing. Send your grace. Send your love. Make your loving and healing presence known among us. Strengthen us through the power of your Spirit. Come and dwell within us. Root us and ground us in your love. Make known to us the fullness of your love that surpasses knowledge. To you be glory in the church, in our families, in our relationships and in Christ Jesus now and forever more. Amen.

Sending Hymn(s)

HWB No. 284	<i>Come away to the skies</i>
HWB No. 420	<i>Heart with loving heart</i>
HWB No. 421	<i>Bless'd be the tie that binds</i>
HWB No. 423	<i>May the grace of Christ our Savior</i>

Benediction Ephesians 3:16-21

*Worship Service 5: Lamenting Sexual Abuse
When Sexuality and Intimacy are Exploited and Violated*

It is painfully clear that people choose not to live up to God's good intentions for creation. Too often we deny the image of God within ourselves and within others. Too often we⁴⁶ violate the beautiful gift of sexuality within another; too often we have had the beautiful gift of sexuality violated within our own bodies. Intimacy and trust is too often broken within our marriages, within our families, within the church, within the world. Too often the innocent and vulnerable – most often women and children – have violence inflicted upon their bodies through harassment, abuse, rape. It is devastating and humiliating when this happens; it is all the more painful when such violence is inflicted by someone we had trusted. Too many live with the guilt and shame inflicted upon them by their abusers. Too often we have blamed the victim for the terrible violations that have been inflicted. Too often we have remained silent, wishing to deny that such a devastating reality exists within the church.

It is vital that we within the church – we who know best the One who created our sexuality as very good – begin and continue to talk about the ways⁴⁷ that we violate the sexuality of others and the ways that our own sexuality has been violated.

This service is one way to begin to break the silence. There is something powerful in simply naming that which has afflicted us. This service focuses on the rape of Tamar from 2 Samuel 13.⁴⁸ Here is a tragic story of an innocent woman being raped by her brother. Here is a tragic story of lust, desire, false notions of intimacy, and the sense of male entitlement. I have included this service with the series because I believe that one must speak to the abuses of sexuality if one is to address sexuality within the church. May this service speak to all who have been violated; may it be a step on the path to healing.

This service includes more annotations and suggested words. Yes it is very important to talk about, but one should do so with great care. Be sure to let your congregation that this is coming ahead of time as well as do what you can to provide a safe space for children and those affected by abuse.

I would hope that this conversation would continue long after this worship service. It is a devastating reality that affects many people within the church. And if we cannot talk about it within the church, then we have lost our relevance and witness, and we have denied our calling to care for the broken, the oppressed, those in need of healing, “the least of these.”

46 This is a collective “we” that encompasses all of humanity.

47 This can be through committing physical and sexual abuse, through harassment, through objectifying others, through the language that we choose to speak about people of the opposite gender and language we use for our own gender. This can be through accepting the cultural stereotypes for males and females, through perpetuating the unrealistic beauty standards of the culture, through reinforcing hierarchical and patriarchal structures, through keeping silent when we see such violations taking place.

48 Other texts could certainly be used as well. For other suggestions (although not an exhaustive list by any means) see the footnote with the Scripture Reading of 2 Samuel in the order of worship.

LAMENTING SEXUAL ABUSE

Focus Statement: We lament the ways that the good gift of sexuality has been violated within people we love and within ourselves. Likewise, we lament the ways that the good gift of sexuality has been violated by our own actions and our failure to act. We seek to break the silence on this devastating reality, we seek to bring healing and hope to all who have been violated, and we seek to affirm the beauty of the image of God within each of us.

Possible Visuals: I am suggesting that visuals be stark and simple to show the pain that abuse brings. One could either use simply a cross, a candle, and a jug of anointing oil. Or one could use a bare branch put in a simple vase that includes either one or three small flowers growing from the branches to symbolize the deep pain, as well as the possible future hope for those who have experienced abuse.

GATHERING AND LAMENTING

New Testament Reading Romans 8:22-23

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.⁴⁹

Introductory Words

This is a service of lament. Lament in worship is an opportunity to grieve all that is broken within ourselves, within the church, within the creation. Lament is a form of worship included within the Bible itself, particularly within the book of Psalms, as many give voice to the painful realities and heart-wrenching emotions of the psalmists as they cry out all of their anger and devastation before God.

And so today we come before God to offer our heartfelt lament for all of the times when things fall short of God's good intentions for creation. We lament that which is broken within ourselves, within the church, within creation. We lament the times that intimacy and trust is broken in our marriages, within our families, within the church, and within the world. We lament for all, especially those who are innocent and vulnerable (most often women and children), who have violence inflicted upon their bodies through violence and sexual abuse.

But we also come this morning with hope that in God's presence there is healing. And one way to begin the healing process is to simply break the silence and to name this horrible reality that so many face on a daily basis, and to proclaim as a church that this is completely contrary to God's good intentions for creation.

We also recognize that speaking of sexual abuse can call to mind memories that are traumatic and disturbing. If memories make this too difficult to remain, you are free to get up and leave at any time.⁵⁰

And so today we simply come, knowing that much is broken and afflicted within creation, within the church, and within ourselves, longing for God's healing presence to come and set things right. And so let us enter into a space of worship and lament for the deep pain and brokenness that comes as a result of sexual abuse and exploitation.

49 I have chosen this passage because of its longing, its lament for the creation being subjected to futility (earlier in the passage), and its lament as we long for our bodies to be redeemed. Many bodies do not feel redeemed, many bodies have suffered abuse and sexual violence by the hands of others. Even we who have the first fruits of the Spirit experience this longing for the redemption of our bodies and of our creation. We are still waiting for Christ to come and set things right.

50 It is strongly encouraged to make a safe space both for children (such as by providing alternative programming for them during the worship due to the violent nature of the topic) and for people who have been sexually abused (such as by making a pastor and/or deacons available during the service, in a separate space, as well as by clearly stating that pastors and deacons are available afterwards for anyone who needs to talk following the service).

Call to Worship

One: To you, Creator of humanity, of truth and beauty, we pray:

Hear my voice, for it is the voice of the victims of abuse and sexual violence among the church,
among the world, among us gathered today

Hear my voice, for it is the voice of all children who suffer and who will suffer at the
hands of those who take advantage of their vulnerability and who exploit the gift of your
sexuality within them

Hear my voice when I beg you to instill into the hearts of all human beings a vision of peace
and a longing for justice in this broken world

Hear my voice for it cries out in lament for all who have experienced violence, exploitation,
and abuse

Hear my voice for it cries out in anguish for all who have had your image denied within them

**Many: Lord give us courage and strength to speak out on behalf of all who have suffered at the
hands of others. Give us a voice to break the silence**

*All: Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer*⁵¹

Gathering Prayer

God, who cries with us in our pain,

We gather together as your people, to lament all that is broken and wounded, to seek your
healing presence. Grant us the courage to cry for justice and healing for all who are battered, abused,
and neglected. Grant us the strength to pray with them, for them, and in their stead.

Open our eyes and our ears and loosen our tongues so that we might begin to break the silence
and seek to be present to and provide safe spaces for all who are hurting in our families, churches, and
communities around us. Grant us the wisdom to act with compassion and redemption, to walk
alongside, and to share the heavy burden. Grant us the power to be agents of healing and change, to
clothe all who are hurting with dignity and respect. Grant us the courage to walk in the darkness, to
seek the oppressed, to find the wounded and faint-hearted, as you yourself have done for us.

Be present with us as we meet together to lament all that is broken and wounded, and to seek
your healing presence. In the name of your son we pray, Amen.

OR

Our gracious creative God, we hold up the most fragile ones among us now for your attention.
We beseech for these your tenderest love and mercy, for they have suffered at the hands of those who
fed and taught them and have fallen like sparrows in the grass. Yet we too, your eye on earth, Word
made flesh, have committed many tragedies in their regard: We have required silence as their
expression of peace, and when they have broken silence, too often we have moved to protect ourselves,
sometimes even called their truths lies. We have used them for our own gain, for we are tempted to
power over the weak. We snatch away their innocence and heap on them shame that belongs to us.
These are our sins toward the weakest; we confess them and ask now for your healing touch on them
and us. Let the smallest thrive in innocence and beauty; feed them, teach them clarifying anger, and
restore them to their dignity. Let us make the journey through the valley of our own shame and
fragility, let the weak show us the path, regardless of the immediate cost to our serenity. Gracious

⁵¹ Adapted from *Sing the Journey* #140. I used this for its imagery and language of the voice, for too often we are silent
about this horrific reality within our midst. It is my sincere prayer that we might speak out on behalf of all who have
been sexually abused and violated.

creative God, Mother the smallest secret ones in each of us, until we can cherish them ourselves. Amen.⁵²

Gathering Song(s)⁵³

HWB No. 144	<i>Kyrie eleison</i>
HWB No. 348	<i>Oh, Lord, hear my prayer</i>
HWB No. 353	<i>Lord, listen to your children praying</i>
HWN No. 372	<i>O healing river</i>
STJ No. 62	<i>Christ's is the world⁵⁴</i>
	<i>What Comfort Can Our Worship Bring⁵⁵</i>
	<i>Sometimes Our Only Song Is Weeping⁵⁶</i>

Offering Our Gifts

God of mercy, take these offerings, we pray, as our protest against all that is evil and ugly and impoverished, trivial and wretched and tyrannical, in our world and in ourselves. Amen.⁵⁷

PROCLAIMING GOD'S STORY

Children's Focus

- This is a difficult topic. Perhaps the best way to speak to children is to simply remind them that their body is their own and that they are created good and deeply loved. One could use ideas from the *Circles of Grace* curriculum or read a book such as:
 - *Your Body Belongs to You* by Cornelia Maude Spelman
 - *It's My Body: a book to teach young children how to resist uncomfortable touch* by Lory Freeman
 - *My Body is Private* by Linda Walvoord Girard
 - *I Said No!: a kid-to-kid guide to keeping private parts private* by Zachary and Kimberly King
- As the children go back to their seats or to a safe space provided for them where they will be led in alternate activities for the morning, you could have the congregation sing the refrain of STS No. 47 *Let the children come to me*

Scripture Reading Psalm 22:1-2, 6-7, 11, 14-15⁵⁸

52 Joyce Munro, "Prayer for the Smallest," in *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* by Carolyn Holderread Heggen (Herald Press, 1993). It is a beautiful prayer of lament and confession that also speaks to our silence on the issue of sexual abuse. I also appreciate the image of the mothering God, for too often abuse is inflicted by males and many do not find healing or hope in the image of a God who is only portrayed as male.

53 Unfortunately our hymnal and supplements do not contain many laments that aren't tied to confession. I would strongly urge against choosing songs that ask for forgiveness, as sexual abuse is NOT the fault of the victim.

54 This is the song that speaks most explicitly about abuse from our hymnal and supplements. However I'm not sure how I feel about the last line, "a touching place." It may be received negatively by those who have experienced touch in a negative way. I would be sure to speak explicitly to this to the congregation before it was sung. I would also mention that the church is to be a place where touch is a positive and affirming thing (as this is how I interpret this phrase to mean).

55 Adam M. L. Tice, *Woven into Harmony: 50 Hymn Texts*.

56 Adam M. L. Tice, *Claim the Mystery 50 More Hymn Texts*.

57 An excerpt from *Sing the Journey* #147.

58 I have chosen the lament from Psalm 22 as an additional Scripture passage, the psalm that Jesus cried out from the cross, a reminder that even God's own self was afflicted; a psalm that speaks to longing for God to hear our voice. But other passages come to mind depending on the shape of the service. Perhaps one could use Matthew 19:13-15 where

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I find no rest.
I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.
I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast.
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

Hymn of Response STS No. 84 *So much wrong*

INTRODUCTION TO HYMN: While on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God,” Why have you forsaken me.” Often, in our darkest moments, when we or those we love are harmed and hurting, it can feel as though God has abandoned us.

Yet this psalm and this song remind us that even God's own body was afflicted and violated. May we find assurance that even in moments of deep pain and grief, that our God, who is intimately familiar with pain suffers and weeps with us. Let us sing together...

Scripture Reading 2 Samuel 13:1-2259

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE: The text that I am about to read is one of a number of texts of sexual terror that are a very troubling part of our Bible. I want to give a trigger warning because of its explicit sexual violence. If you feel like you need to leave at any point in the service, please do what you need to do in order to take care of yourself.

For some of us, we may wish to see this text and others like it stricken from the Bible and never read again. Indeed, it's much easier to pretend they do not exist because they make us uncomfortable. Yet to silence these texts or to deny their existence is to rob them of their witness.

Yes, these texts are uncomfortable, but our discomfort does not mean that these painful texts are ill-suited to the Bible and that they should be discarded or relegated beyond the borders of our Sacred Scriptures. Sometimes we continue to read and teach these hurtful texts not because we affirm their answers, but because they force us to confront the important questions.⁶⁰

By continuing to read and wrestle with these texts we hear an often neglected story of violence that people (especially women and children) experience on a daily basis.

By continuing to read and wrestle with these texts, we can lament these stories, weep over these stories, and use these stories to remind ourselves that abuse does not have the final word.

Jesus exhorts no one to hinder children. Perhaps one could use a healing passage from the gospels. Or one could use Psalm 88, the only lament song that does not end in praise as a way to give voice to those who suffer from their abuse. I think that verse 8 especially speaks to the plight of the abused, “You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them.”

59 The rape of Tamar is a text of abuse and sexual violence. It seems very fitting for this topic, but there are certainly many others that could be used, especially passages that exploit and inflict violence upon the sexuality of women such as Hagar (who was forced to sleep with Abraham then thrown out into the wilderness, see Gen. 21), Dinah (a victim of rape, see Gen. 34), Bathsheba (who was raped by David, whose husband was murdered, and who was then forced to marry her rapist, see 2 Sam. 10) the concubine (who is gang raped, murdered, and chopped to pieces, with no one to mourn her, see Judges 19), the apocryphal book of Susanna, etc. Unfortunately there is no shortage of texts that could be used. Perhaps even more problematic are the texts that portray God as an abusive husband, such as Hosea 2. I would encourage very careful study if you were going to pursue the latter.

60 Adapted from a quote by Katheryn Pfisterer Darr (quoted and annotated in the sermon notes in full).

By continuing to wrestle with these difficult questions we can work towards making a difference in the lives of all people who have experienced abuse as well as prevent further abuse.

By continuing to read and wrestle with these texts alongside the overarching story of hope and shalom found throughout the Scriptures, we can proclaim that abuse is not in any way, shape, or form a part of God's good purposes for creation.

Hear now the story of Tamar as told by the author of 2 Samuel...

Sermon

Sermon Seeds:

- A sermon on this devastating topic requires much care and forethought and careful study.
- It may be important to confess and denounce the way that the church has too often kept silent on this, or denied voice to those who speak out, or blamed the violated for what has happened to them. Our silence has perpetuated abuse, just as Jonadab, Absalom, and King David's actions were partly responsible in leading to the rape of Tamar as well as perpetuating her pain in forcing her to remain silent, regardless of what their intentions were.
- Rape, abuse, and sexual violence is a terrible atrocity, yet all the more painful when it is done to us by someone we trust, a family member, a church member, a friend. We need to be aware of this reality within our congregation and families. This is a devastating reality within the church, and whether or not we are aware of stories, abuse affects a number of people in each of our congregations.
- Phyllis Trible has a chapter on the rape of Tamar from her book *Texts of Terror*. This is a recommended resource.
- Trible writes: "Absalom remembers; the narrator records; and we the readers respond. If we cannot sanction the violent revenge Absalom exacted, we can appropriate the compassion he shows for his sister."⁶¹
 - We too are called to show compassion and to hear the pain of those who have suffered at the hands of another.
- Another highly recommended resource is the sermon on this text by Meghan Good: "An Everyday Hero: The Untold Story of Tamar"
<http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/author/meghangood/>
- Christ himself was violated, afflicted, abused. Christ did not respond out of violence or hatred toward those who abused and murdered him. Instead, with his dying breath he prayed for God to forgive them. However, before we too quickly recommend forgiveness on the part of those who have been abused, it is important to realize that people in our congregations may not be in a place to forgive the one who abused them; perhaps they will never be in such a place to forgive. But they could pray for God to forgive when they cannot.
- So what do we do with these texts of terror? For some of us, we may wish to see them all stricken from the Bible and never read again. Our tendency is to pretend that they do not exist because they make us uncomfortable. Yet to silence these texts is to rob them of their witness. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr proclaims that our discomfort "does not mean that the text in question is ill-suited to the canon and should be discarded or relegated beyond the borders of their 'canon within the canon.' Sometimes, we continue to embrace hurtful texts not because we affirm their answers, but because they force us to confront the important questions."⁶² By continuing to read and wrestle with these texts we hear an often neglected story of violence that people (especially women and children) experience every day. By continuing to read and wrestle with these texts,

61 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 55-56.

62 Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 195.

we can lament these stories, weep over these stories, and use them to remind ourselves that abuse does not have the final word and that we can work towards making a difference in the lives of all people who have experienced abuse. By continuing to read and wrestle with these texts alongside the overarching story of the canon, we can begin to reaffirm that this is not, in fact, in any way a part of God's purpose for creation.

Response

For a response, it would be good to lead a service of anointing and healing.

INTRODUCTORY WORDS: Yes, there is deep pain, but we remember and we hope and we proclaim that pain will not have the final word. We enter now into a time of anointing, prayer and healing. This is a time of anointing:

- For all who lament the devastating reality of abuse and violence inflicted upon others and ourselves (in the world, in the church, in those we love, in ourselves)
- For all who lament the loss of intimacy, the betrayal of trust, or broken relationships within the church or within our own families
- For all who feel pain in our bodies or pain in our spirits
- For all who are grieving the loss of one we have loved through distance or death
- For all who wish to receive God's healing in our lives

Come, you who are weary and heavy laden. Come, you who are beloved to God. Come and receive the peace of Christ which passes understanding.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Come and receive the healing of the One who made you and loves you deeply.

Song(s) of Response

HWB No. 248	<i>My God, my God, why</i>
HWB No. 372	<i>O healing river</i>
HWB No. 377	<i>Healer of our ev'ry ill</i>
HWB No. 637	<i>When grief is raw</i>
HWB No. 47	<i>Oh, Lord have mercy</i>
STS No. 67	<i>Khudaya, rahem kar (Have mercy on us, Lord)⁶³</i>
	<i>When My Soul Is Sore and Troubled⁶⁴</i>
	<i>For Those Who Cannot Find a Way⁶⁵</i>
	<i>Will Morning Never Come?⁶⁶</i>
	<i>My God, My God, Would You Forsake Me?⁶⁷</i>

Scripture Reading Psalm 22:3-5, 9-10, 22, 24-31⁶⁸

INTRODUCTORY WORDS:

63 I recommend having a soloist sing this unaccompanied both in the Pakistani language and in English. It is a haunting melody that seems to speak of much pain and suffering. The unaccompanied voice seems to speak to the rawness of grief. God's mercy seems necessary both for those who have violated others as well as those who have been violated.

64 Adam M. L. Tice, *Woven Into Harmony: 50 Hymn Texts*.

65 Adam M. L. Tice, *A Greener Place To Grow: 50 More Hymn Texts*.

66 Ibid.

67 Adam M. L. Tice, *Stars Like Grace: 50 More Hymn Texts*

68 I would strongly encourage you to read this from *The Inclusive Bible*, which uses non-gendered language for God out of respect for those who find no hope in calling God "Father" after being abused by a male family member.

Jesus spoke the first words from this psalm on the cross. Yet we realize that despair and feeling forsaken are not the last word, as this psalm ends with praise to God. Even when afflicted and dying, Jesus did not cease from praising God.

We realize that many who have experienced abuse and violence done either to themselves or to loved ones may not be in a place where they feel that they can praise God. We recognize that many may still be angry at God and we pray that we as the church can offer a safe place to voice our pain and anger. But perhaps even if you cannot praise God yet, you can let us do this for you (just it may be easier to let God forgive those who have wronged us rather than being able to forgive ourselves). For though the world is deeply broken now, we trust that God will ultimately come and set things right, bringing healing and setting all who are oppressed and afflicted free. We trust that there is hope even in the midst of deep pain. Receive now these words of the psalm as our words of assurance:

PSALM 22:3-5, 9-10, 22, 24-31:

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

It was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

I will tell of your name to my sisters and brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

For you did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;

you did not hide your face from me, but heard me when I cried to you.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear you.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek God shall praise God. May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;

and all the families of the nations shall worship before God.

For dominion belongs to the Lord, and God rules over the nations.

To you, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;

before you shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for you.

Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the Lord,

and shall proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it.

Congregational Prayer

God of the Broken and Hurting, we come to you because you know what it's like to be rejected and abused, to suffer unjustly, innocently. You know the needs of those who suffer because of physical, emotional, sexual abuse.

God of Healing and Blessing, our hearts cry out for our mercy and love to heal our woundedness. Touch the child within us who needs to know love and acceptance, who can teach us how to play and enjoy life. In your mercy give courage to face painful memories to journey toward wholeness. Bring healing to damaged self-confidence, to battered self-esteem, to the ego with inadequate boundaries. Teach us to trust in appropriate and healthy ways.

Forgiving, Merciful God, you know the cost of forgiveness, the difficulty of forgiving. Especially you know how hard it is to forgive violence to one's own body and soul. Give us courage to be angry at injustice done to us, courage to grieve what we have lost, courage to heal, to let go of the hatreds that bind us.

Spirit God, touch our spirits with your healing love, with your wisdom and courage, with your compassion. Give us hope.

God-of-all-Life, raise us to new life, to new ways of relating. Show us your unconditional love. Help us to love ourselves as you love us and to love others as we love ourselves.

May your Blessing and Healing rest upon us. Amen.⁶⁹

Sending Hymn(s)

STJ No. 107 *God remembers*

STJ No. 109 *There is more love somewhere*

STJ No. 115 *Beauty for brokenness*

STJ No. 121 *Nothing is lost on the breath of God*

Benediction

One: We believe that beyond the violence,

Many: There can be love

One: That beyond the despair,

Many: There can be hope

One: That beyond the torment,

Many: We will find rest

One: That beyond our brokenness;

Many: There can be healing

One: That beyond our agony,

Many: We will find joy

*All: O God, transform our disbelief and gently carry us from darkness to light!*⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Nancy S. Lapp, "Prayer," in *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* by Carolyn Holderread Heggen (Herald Press, 1993). I have chosen this for it eloquently gives voice to those who are hurting deeply, as well as makes the connection with Jesus, who also was violated and abused. Other possibilities would include Joyce Munro's "Prayer in Three Parts" from the same book and *Sing the Journey* #144 (adapted).

⁷⁰ Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. This resource is highly recommended.

Worship Service 6: Adopted into God's Family
The Church as the Family of God

The church is the place where we should be able to experience our most intimate and fulfilling relationships. We are to build each other up in love. We are to walk with each other, to support each other, to encourage each other, to laugh with each other, to cry with each other. We call each other brothers and sisters in Christ. We are all created as God's beloved children. Our relationships with each other are to witness to the watching world of God's deep love for us.

Yet, as with all families, there is much dysfunction, pain, and broken relationships within the church. Many would rather sever ties over dogmas than seek to reconcile with each other. Many would rather not address our pain and conflict than practice the Rule of Christ from Matthew 18.⁷¹ Many would rather assign blame and get into heated arguments than practice and embody the fruits of the Spirit.

And all of us, at some point or another, have been hurt by people within the church. Perhaps our questions about faith or our experiences of God have been silenced. Perhaps our ideas have not been taken seriously and our voices have not been heard. Perhaps we have been told that a beloved family member or friend did not experience healing because the lack of her/his faith. Perhaps we have been ostracized and alienated. Perhaps no one has listened to our pain. Perhaps we or someone we love has been abused. Perhaps we have experienced hateful words (either unintentional or deliberate).

It is devastating when such things happen within the very body that is called to show Christ's love to the world. Though we who are in Christ are a part of the new creation, the church is still influenced and corrupted by the power of sin. We are being transformed into Christ's likeness, but the powers of this world still hold sway over us.

One needs to acknowledge the brokenness within our relationships in the church. It cannot simply be denied or swept under the rug. Yet at the same time, we cannot wallow in our brokenness expecting that nothing will change. Instead we should know that despite our brokenness, Christ is still working through us and within us.

The church is the family of God. This is a family that transcends all borders. This is a family that includes people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all life experiences. Paul proclaims that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are One in Christ Jesus.⁷² Jesus says

71 It should be made clear that the Rule of Christ is for normal conflict within the church; Jesus expected this. However, this does NOT pertain to cases of abuse or when there is a significant power imbalance. This is not a rule to follow in all situations, and in fact this text has been misused and caused people great pain when used in situations of sexual or physical abuse or when there is a great power imbalance.

72 Galatians 3:28.

that **all** who do the Lord's will are his sisters and his brothers.⁷³ The prologue of John's Gospel proclaims that all who give our allegiance to Jesus are given the power to become children of God.⁷⁴ Despite our many differences, we are all adopted into the family of God. We are loved deeply by the One who made us and who loves us as parents love their children.

May we seek to build intimate and loving relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. May we seek build up each other and encourage each other. There will be times when this is difficult, but we trust that Christ is indeed among us wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

This worship service focuses on the intimate relationships that we have with one another within the church, the family of God. It is drawn from passages that focus on family language and speak of our calling within the church to build up each other in love. All can experience intimate relationships within the church regardless of age, gender, marital status, body type, race, and so forth. All are welcome and beloved children of God.

73 Mark 3:35.

74 John 1:12.

ADOPTED INTO GOD'S FAMILY

Focus Statement: Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." John's prologue proclaims that "all who receive Jesus and all who pledge their allegiance to him are given power to become children of God." We are all adopted into God's family. All are welcome as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

Possible Visuals: Visuals could include artwork or images of familial images. You could include pictures of families from your own congregation alongside pictures of people from your own congregation interacting together (reminding us that Jesus redefines the family as the church itself). You could also include images of people from different ethnicities, ages, and genders interacting in compassion with one another, as the church transcends all borders.

GATHERING AND PRAISING

New Testament Reading Ephesians 1:3-6

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in love. God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

New Testament Reading Colossians 3:14-15

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.

Gospel Reading Mark 3:35

And Jesus replied, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Call to Worship

One: We come together as the family of faith. All are welcome here!

Grandparents, Mothers, Fathers,
All who are single, All who are married,
Teenagers, Young Adults, Children,
Women, Men, Girls, and Boys,

All: All are welcome here!

One: We are destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ for God's good pleasure

We are joint heirs with Christ
We are God's beloved children,
We are sisters and brothers in Christ

All: All are welcome here!⁷⁵

OR

One: As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,
let us clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

**Many: May we bear with one another and forgive each other,
just as God has forgiven us.**

One: Above all, may we clothe ourselves with love,

⁷⁵ Scriptural imagery from Romans 8:17 and Ephesians 1:5. For another litany option see *Words for Worship* #105.

which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Many: May the Peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

We are thankful we are all called to one family.

One: All who are baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ

**Many: There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free,
male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.**

One: We have received a spirit of adoption.

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that Spirit bearing witness that we are children of God.

All: For all who are led by the Spirit are children of God so that God may be glorified!⁷⁶

Gathering Prayer

God who loves us as a mother and father love their children,

We thank you for the bonds of love that we share within your family, the church. May all feel welcome here. May all feel affirmed for who we are. May all of our gifts together glorify your holy name.

Strengthen our love for one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and strengthen our love for you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Through Jesus Christ, who binds us all together, we pray, Amen.

Gathering Song(s)⁷⁷

HWN No. 8 *Brethren we have met to worship*

STJ No. 34 *Loving Spirit*

STJ No. 54 *Longing for light*

STJ No. 64 *Somos el cuerpo de Cristo⁷⁸*

STJ No. 79 *As I went down to the river*

STJ No. 89 *I was there to hear your borning cry*

STJ No. 91 *Like a mother who has borne us
God's Family⁷⁹*

Offering Our Gifts HWB No. 750

PROCLAIMING GOD'S STORY

Children's Focus

- One could ask the children about what they appreciate about their family. Remind them that the church is also supposed to be our family and that we can receive these wonderful types of relationships within the church as well.
- Or one could tell about a story of adoption and then talk about how God has adopted us as children within God's family.

Scripture Readings Colossians 3:12-17⁸⁰
Mark 3:31-35

⁷⁶ Scriptural references from Colossians 3:12-15; Galatians 3:27-28; Romans 8:14-16

⁷⁷ Most of the songs in this service include either familiar language for the congregation or imagery of God as a parent.

⁷⁸ Some of the songs for this worship service are intentionally chosen from other cultures to remind us of the family of God which transcends all borders of nationality, race, or ethnicity.

⁷⁹ Song by Patty Shelly. This can be found in *Sing and Rejoice* No. 31.

⁸⁰ No explicit familial language (apart from God the Father and beloved), but it is our high calling within the church and a way that we may experience and seek intimacy with one another. If you wanted passages that included more of familiar and/or adoption language, other possibilities could include: Galatians 3:26-4:7, Romans 8:12-25, John 1:1-13, or Ephesians 1:3-14, among others.

Sermon

Sermon Seeds:

- The ties of family go deeper than simply blood. Jesus brought a new understanding to what it means to be family when he expanded his family to include all those who do the will of God.
- The church should be the place where we are able to experience our most intimate and fulfilling relationships. We are the ones who know the God who created us to be very good. We are the ones who know the God who created us to be in fellowship with one another. We are the ones whom God calls to extend loving arms to all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Yet, as in any family, we have our problems. We get angry at each other. We disagree. We sever ties. We exclude. We judge. We play favorites. We abuse and neglect.
- Sometimes we're just tired... Hard to find the energy to take care of ourselves, let alone others... Too tired to do the things we have to do in order to maintain our home let alone maintain our family...
- There will be times when intimacy within the church is difficult. True intimacy is indeed difficult. It takes a long time. It takes much vulnerability, and trust, and patience, and fidelity, and commitment. But we seek for this with the encouragement of our sisters and brothers in the church and knowing that Christ's Spirit is present with us and transforming us.
- This could also include ways that we build intimacy with each other, through listening to each other's stories, through honest, vulnerable, and open sharing, through seeking to truly listen and understand, through praying together and for each other, through service together, through preparing and sharing a meal together (which would tie in well with the sacrament of communion following the sermon)

Response *Celebrating Holy Communion Together*

- This service should be a way of renewing our commitments to each other and to God. It should serve as a reminder of our intimate relationships with those within the church as well as our intimate relationship with our Parent and Creator God.
- It would be meaningful to connect the image of many different grains of wheat coming together to form one loaf, just as each of us make up the one body. One can also lament the ways that, just as the bread itself is broken, we experience brokenness within the church.
- Three worship resources that connect the imagery of family with communion are #265 in *Words for Worship* (a prayer), #116 in *Words for Worship 2* (a litany), and #173 in *Sing the Journey* (a prayer which also acknowledges our brokenness).

Song(s) of Response

HWB No. 306	<i>In Christ there is no East or West</i>
HWB No. 322	<i>For we are strangers no more</i>
HWB No. 407	<i>We are people of God's peace</i>
HWB. No. 459	<i>I come with joy to meet my Lord</i>
HWN NO. 460	<i>Una espiga</i>
STJ No. 38	<i>Beloved, God's chosen</i>
STJ No. 87	<i>Put peace into each other's hands</i>
STJ No. 88	<i>Haleluya! Pelo tsa rona</i>
STS No. 100	<i>O blessed spring</i>
STS No. 117	<i>How can I say</i>

Congregational Prayer

We pray for our sisters and brothers in the faith, wherever they may be, even unto the ends of the earth, whether assembled or scattered, in sorrow or sickness, in bonds of oppression or in prison of earthly walls or of their own making. Comfort them and us with your great love and keep us all within the loving arms of your Holy Spirit. May we all abide in your love.⁸¹

We praise you for loving us so deeply that you gave to all of us the power to become your children. We thank you for loving us so deeply that you have chosen us and that you have adopted us as your deeply beloved sons and daughters.

We love, therefore, O God, because you have first loved us. Clothe us then in your love, which binds all things together. Clothe us, as your beloved children with your compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness. Clothe us with your love that this family, your family, the church, may be a place where all experience a sense of belonging and compassion.

May this family be a place where all are nurtured and cared for, where all have their needs for intimacy and meaningful relationships met, where all are welcomed with open arms. May your Word and your Will dwell in us richly. And whatever we do, whether in word or in deed, may we do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who binds us all together through your love and who creates us into one new humanity, your family, the church. For it is in his name we pray. Amen.⁸²

Sending Hymn(s)

HWB No. 420	<i>Heart with loving heart</i>
HWB No. 421	<i>Bless'd be the tie that binds</i>
HWB No. 423	<i>May the grace of Christ our Savior</i>
HWB No. 478	<i>Sent forth by God's blessing</i>
STJ No. 78	<i>Sizohamba naye</i>

Benediction

May the grace of Christ that daily renews our lives,
and the love of God that enables us to love all persons,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that unites us as one family,
strengthen us to see the beauty of the image of God within ourselves and within all whom we meet.
Go now in peace, knowing that you are a beloved child in God's family.⁸³

81 Adapted from *Words for Worship* #193.

82 Scriptural allusions taken from Colossians 3:12-17.

83 Adapted from *Sing the Journey* #159 to convey the message of the worship series.

