

Faith Practices:



“For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other; as indeed you are doing.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11

Early Christians were like any other family — mealtimes were often the occasion for division and disagreement! Writing to Christians at Rome, the apostle Paul chided those who were quick to judge the table manners of their fellow Christians. The meat-eaters disparaged the vegetarians; the non-drinkers put down the drinkers. To this community of disgruntled diners Paul directed sage advice: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you....” (Romans 15:7). His injunction carries the weight of “Befriend one another....” In the etiquette of the Ancient Near East, the people with whom a man dined were his friends, and his friends were the people with whom he dined.

Paul’s counsel reminded the Christians at Rome of the fellowship they shared in Christ, who had made them not servants, but friends (John 15:15). He appealed to the office of friendship, which was characterized by benevolence; literally, wishing the other well. “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor” (Romans 15:1-2).

Luther captured the importance of this practice of encouragement in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Characteristically, he turned a negative “thou shalt not” commandment into a positive “thou shalt” commandment.

Not only should we refrain from betraying, slandering or defaming the neighbor, but we should “apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does.” Luther knew the corrosive effects of negative thinking and gossip on the fabric of community. He also knew that we can often inspire people to act better than they might otherwise act. He regarded the practice of encouragement as one way in which the Gospel itself offered counsel.

Citing Matthew 18:20, “...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” Luther commended the practice of “mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.” He envisioned a community of friends, called together to listen to the Good News and challenged to be a mouthpiece of that Good News to one another in speech, comfort, and friendship.

Luther’s community of friends would also encourage each other in the lifelong task of Christian education. Christian education or catechesis (from the Greek *katechein*, “sounding back”) is teaching what God “wishes us to do or not do” (The Ten Commandments), a “setting forth all that we must expect and receive from God” (the Creed), and a demonstration of “how we are to pray” (the Lord’s Prayer). Luther insisted that every baptized Christian must have a minimal theological understanding of what God has done, is doing, and is yet to do. The practice of encouragement involves striving together for some understanding of life with God. We teach the faith as a gift offered through Christ crucified that cannot be achieved on our own.

“I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” — Romans 1:12



BRINGING IT HOME

How many shoes in a shoe store? Hundreds? Thousands? There seems to be something for everyone!

Think of a time you tried on someone else’s shoes. How did they fit? Could you wear them for a day?

Imagine what it might be like to switch shoes with someone else.

What might it be like to have for a parent to switch with a preschooler, or a teen with an older adult, a happily-married homemaker with a single parent working two jobs, an executive with a blue-collar worker, an American with an Ethiopian spouse?

When little children shuffle around in adult shoes, we laugh because they look so out of character. And yet, we might tend to feel the same way if we actually walked in someone else's shoes through their average day.

“If then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”— Philipians 2:1

Talk about ways you can be more sensitive to people in need and encourage them in their faith.

Look through the following ideas you can use to help increase your sensitivity to others and your willingness to nurture them in faith. Choose one, two or more.

- Purchase a pair of “heart-shaped” sun glasses from a party supply store. Try them on and think about how the color and shape of lens affects the way you see something. What difference would make if we looked at the following people through God’s eyes?
 - Kids on the playground
 - Teammates in athletics
 - Co-workers
 - People who seem to be different from us
 - Clerks, waitresses and service attendants
 - Refugee families throughout the world
- Write words of encouragement and affirmation on self-adhesive notes. Stick them on mirrors, doors and other places where others in the family can see them.
- Invite grandparents to send frequent postcards to support the challenges and accomplishments of their grandchildren.
- Be kind to the people you meet. Offer a smile, a greeting or gesture as you pass by. Explain to your children that, “We love, because God first loved us” (1 John 4:7-8).

- Nurture unconditional love. Teach your family members to handle inappropriate behavior with a response, “I might not like what you do, but I’ll always love you.”
- Leave a pair of shoes near your door to remind you to be sensitive to people in need.
- Find ways to address some of the greater world challenges. Go to the Lutheran Office of Governmental Affairs Web page (www.loga.org) to learn ways you can be advocate for change.

“For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, for your welfare and not harm, to give you a future and a hope.”
 — *Jeremiah 29:11*

LOVE SHOWS ITSELF IN ACTION!

- Check out programs in our community, along with shelters and hotlines for critical care. Consider how you can support these and other programs as a way to encourage others.
- Be available. Just as the little boy offered his fish and loaves to help feed the 5000 (John 6:9), our willingness to let God use what we have is almost more important than what we actually have to give.
- Be a friend to a new family in your church or community. Invite them into your home or meet them at a park or a fast food restaurant.
- Encourage your children to call a friend who has stayed home sick from school or who has missed an athletic game or a Sunday school class.
- Express thanks to those who share their time and talents with you — day care providers, public servants, coaches, dance and music teachers, home nurses. Celebrate the many gifts God has given them.
- Send loving cards to those who are homebound or isolated during our time of pandemic.
- Ask God who you should reach out to.

Encourage  **Encourage**  **Encourage**  **Encourage**