

### OPENING HYMN

“Great God, Your Love Has Called Us”  
(ELW 358)

### OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, in Jesus you remind us that love is the heart of faith. Guide us beyond certainty to compassion; that in holy curiosity and beloved community we may come to know you fully, even as we have been fully known. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

### FOCUS VERSE

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”  
(1 Corinthians 13:12–13)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

# After certainty

## Session three

### Compassion

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

### INTRODUCTION

*Pastor, why are you preaching on politics? Isn't the church supposed to be non-political?* Many preachers I know have been asked this question, only to find that it really means, “I didn’t agree with what you said.” Still, it’s a fair question, to which the answer is: Yes and No.

Our Christian faith is not, and should not seek to be, partisan: declaring that God is on our side, not theirs; or that if Jesus were to vote today, it would be for my party or my candidate, not yours. At the same time, our faith is naturally and inevitably political for the simple reason that politics (a word that comes from the Greek word for “city”) is essentially about how people live together in community. Scripture has a lot to say about this topic!

Jesus teaches us:

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).*

For Jesus, love for God and neighbor is the center of faith. More about action than emotion, this love is a commitment to seek others’ well-being as fully as our own. We often call this attitude and behavior *compassion*. Christians can think of politics as the way we love our neighbors as a community, letting compassion shape our life together.

Yet in this U.S. presidential election year, and for some time now, a growing polarization in politics has

been creating deep, painful divisions that permeate every area of our lives. Competing political views on the current state of the world declare with certainty that we are living through a moral battle with only two sides: good and evil. In this binary framework, every idea and every person can only be one or the other—perfect or profane, hero or villain. This attitude affects how we relate to one another in families, workplaces, churches and many other kinds of communities. We begin to see ourselves not as neighbors, but as enemies. Those with whom we disagree are no longer people with a different approach to solving problems: They *are* the problem. Little wonder that even close personal relationships have fractured along these political fault lines.

Yet this idea that half the country is good and the other half evil contradicts our Christian theological anthropology—our understanding of what it means to be human, in light of what we understand about God. It also goes against the Lutheran doctrine of *simil justus et peccator*, which reminds us that we are all “saint and sinner” at the same time, with the capacity for good and for harm.

As Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote, “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.” My childhood Lutheran congregation declared this same reality each week in our Confession: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

It’s tempting to leave it right there—to say that no one is perfect, that both sides are valid, that we should simply “agree to disagree” and leave political discussions out of our faith lives. Yet this is equally untrue and equally problematic. Part of the reason political conflict exists is that the issues under consideration *matter*. They have a real effect on

human lives—our own or others’. What we choose to stand against or support reflects what we believe about God, the world and how things should be. Not all issues have two valid sides. History is filled with examples of faithful people working together to end injustice and evil.

For Lutherans, participating in the human communities in which we live is part of our “vocation,” our calling to serve God in every dimension of our lives. Christians are called to good and not to evil. We know in our bones that not all ideas are good. Some are harmful; some are healing. Some are unjust; some are liberating. How do we discern which is which, especially when we know that “now we see in a mirror, dimly... [and] know only in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12)?

It makes sense to vote and act according to our convictions. But when conviction becomes certainty, and certainty becomes judgmentalism, it can fuel divisions that keep us from the beloved community God intends for us. The good news is that there is another option. In this final session, we’ll examine *compassion* as a biblical principle that can ground and guide us as we seek to live faithfully in the personal *and* political spaces of our lives.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

1. How have political issues affected your own personal relationships?
2. Is there a faithful alternative to “agreeing to disagree”? What might that look like?

#### **JESUS’ LOGIC OF LOVE**

📖 **Read:** Matthew 5:21-48,  
Matthew 22:34-40

Many of Jesus’ teachings focus on human relationships in community, and therefore could be

considered political. Jesus often offered his first listeners new interpretations of accepted wisdom. IN Matthew 5, Jesus declares, “You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you...” He then gives several new interpretations of what has been heard in the Ten Commandments: do not murder (v. 21); do not commit adultery (v. 27); and do not swear falsely (v. 33). He also (re)teaches the law of “an eye for an eye,” which comes from Leviticus 24:19-20, and “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (see Matthew 5:43), which isn’t found in the Hebrew scriptures at all, yet Jesus cites it as a truism familiar to his listeners. Perhaps then, as now, there were things people were certain “the Bible says,” even when it doesn’t!

Jesus’ description of the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34) helps us to find the common thread in these (re)teachings. Compassion (love for God and neighbor) is at the heart of God’s instructions for human communities. Love does not dictate a one-size-fits-all certainty, but instead helps people discern how best to love their neighbors in any given situation. This logic of love is used by Jesus to challenge some old certainties.

For example, Jesus’ teaching on adultery and divorce (Matthew 5:27-32) focuses on the actions of husbands, not wives. Why? Considering Jesus’ support for women, such as the sisters Mary and Martha, or Mary of Magdala, it is likely not because Jesus viewed women as incapable. Rather, Jesus speaks into a context where men and women had very different levels of power. Men could more easily ask for a divorce than women. Since a married woman left her family of origin to join her husband’s family, divorce could leave her without the means to support herself. Additionally, a man who “looks at a woman with lust” (and perhaps also makes lewd remarks or engages in other acts of harassment) could damage her reputation even though she did nothing wrong. In striking contrast, Jesus insists that it is the man who looks at a woman with lust who is directed to

cut off his hand or pluck out his eye (metaphorically, we hope!) to avoid this sin. Similarly, a husband who divorces his wife is responsible if she remarries and is thus considered adulterous.

This is Jesus’ logic of love: In a world where some groups unjustly hold power over others, it is a sin to use that power to exploit others. Patriarchal first-century Palestine expects men to act with compassion to help create the justice that is lacking. Jesus teaches that it is the responsibility of men to not harass women or reject their wives. (Women are not to be held responsible for being harassed or rejected—an impossible standard!) When Jesus linked divorce and adultery to the breaking of a commandment, this may have prevented men from treating their wives or other women as disposable, thereby protecting women.

Jesus’ teachings focus on the realities of his time and place. Jesus’ hearers know what their scriptures say. However, Jesus draws them beyond their certainty to consider a new interpretive lens of love: Love is the commandment on which all others depend. Following Jesus’ example, we can also discern what God is saying to us through scripture. When we let go of the need to be certain about one unchanging meaning, we can embrace Jesus’ invitation to use compassion as the lens and logic by which we approach the realities of our world today.

### Share aloud or reflect:

3. How does Jesus’ “logic of love” shape how he interprets the Bible? What can we learn from this?
4. In today’s world, where might Jesus be holding the powerful accountable?

### BE OF THE SAME MIND: COMPASSION AND HUMILITY

📖 **Read:** Philippians 2:1-11

If we didn't know of Paul's close connection with the church at Philippi, his advice to them to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" might beg the question: *Have you ever actually met these people?*

Paul seems to describe the ideal faith community: a harmonious place of shared values, warm fellowship and true belonging. Many of us have longed to find this kind of church, especially when communities we have experienced in real life have let us down in any number of ways: from petty conflicts and misunderstandings to rejection or even spiritual abuse. Is this ideal community possible? Even healthy faith communities disagree on issues big and small, from politics and theology to the best way to set up chairs.

German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, best known for his involvement in the resistance against Hitler during World War II, wrote a book called *Life Together*, that reflects on this reality. Bonhoeffer knew a thing or two about the challenges of being of one mind. In his setting, the Lutheran church had been largely coopted by the Nazi movement, with members either embracing Hitler's brand of nationalism or insisting that the church should not get involved in political matters. Bonhoeffer and others disagreed. They recognized the danger Nazism represented and found it to be in direct opposition to the Gospel. At one point, Bonhoeffer took charge of an underground seminary of the "Confessing Church" that refused Naziism. It was from this context that *Life Together* emerged.

Bonhoeffer cautioned that an idealized community is a "human wish dream"—one that must be shattered by "a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves." Bonhoeffer saw this disillusionment not as a failure, but as a gift of God's grace, and the beginning of true Christian community. Why? Because it is only when our human efforts break down that we truly understand what creates

Christian community. Christian community does not come about from our agreement, nor our "agreement to disagree," or even us at all, but from Jesus Christ alone. We are called, not into some "dream of a community" made in our image but into a real and imperfect community formed by God's grace into the image of Christ.

Paul reminds us that Jesus' defining characteristic was his refusal to "regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Philippians 2:6). Jesus' logic of love took him to the cross, where Jesus emptied himself of divine power, humbling himself for the sake of others. This, finally, is what it means to "be of one mind": We share not an opinion, but a mindset that it is not our certainty, but Christ's compassion that forms us as community.

This is a gift not to be taken lightly: for if we have a connection to one another that does not depend on our similarity to one another, this connection remains, despite our differences and beyond our disillusionment. We have a table to gather around, with Jesus at the center, so we may discern where God is present in our time and place and how God is calling us to love our neighbors. Because Jesus is at the center, God is with us to guide us in that discernment. Because Jesus is at the center, the center can hold, even when we fail.

Beyond the ideal is the real. Beyond disillusionment is grace. Beyond certainty about what a Christian community should be, we find compassion for the real community before us. The witness of Paul and Bonhoeffer echoes Jesus' placement of love at the heart of faith.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

5. When has your "dream" of Christian community led to disillusionment?
6. When have you found true community beyond the ideal?

**“KNOWLEDGE PUFFS UP, BUT LOVE BUILDS UP”:  
COMPASSION IN BELOVED COMMUNITY**

📖 **Read:** 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 10:23-33

*In order for me to write poetry that isn't political  
I must listen to the birds  
and in order to hear the birds  
the warplanes must be silent.*

– Marwan Makhoul, Palestinian poet

For five years, my family and I have served as missionaries in Jerusalem, accompanying Palestinian Christians. While this time has held challenges (including the COVID-19 pandemic), it has never been as hard as it has been after the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and amid the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza. We are surrounded by palpable grief—both Israeli and Palestinian. We hear a military jet on its way to Gaza and know that somewhere, a child who is alive now will not be alive in an hour. I have prayed with someone whose neighbors' family were taken hostage by Hamas, and I have prayed with someone who lost six members of their family to Israeli bombs. Through it all, part of my call has been to speak with ELCA members about how to make sense of what is happening in the Holy Land, and how God is calling us to respond—both as Christians, whose Palestinian siblings in Christ are crying out for justice, and as Americans, whose government has sent tens of billions of dollars in military assistance to Israel.

Conversations about Israel and Palestine can be fraught at the best of times—and these are not the best of times. The political is personal here, and vice-versa. Yet by the same token, there is too much at stake to give up. It matters that we have the hard conversations; and *how* we have these conversations also matters. I take inspiration from an unlikely source: Paul's discussions with early church members in the context of the Roman Empire regarding

the question: *Is it ok to eat meat sacrificed to idols, or not?*

The issue here isn't really food, but rather how certainty and compassion relate to one another in community. Paul acknowledges that eating meat sacrificed to a pagan god is not a sin for those who are “strong” in faith, who know with certainty that “no idol in the world really exists, and that ‘there is no God but one’” (1 Corinthians 8:4). Yet for the “weak” in faith (new Christians), this action appears to embrace pagan gods and rituals, which may confuse them and “wound their conscience” (1 Corinthians 8:12). Even though the “strong” are correct, Paul argues that their certainty should give way to compassion. Knowledge can be liberating when it is shared. However, when knowledge “puffs up” those who are right, to the point of disdain or hostility for others who are less informed, it can tear down a community. Love, in contrast, “builds up.” Paul goes on to reference situations in which believers might use the same logic of compassion to arrive at different conclusions: to eat, or refrain from eating, but in all cases to “not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (1 Corinthians 10:24).

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. popularized the concept of the *beloved community* as a relational model of justice and social change, grounded in nonviolence and compassion. Knowing Dr. King's deep roots in the church and Christian theology, and his commitment to end racism and other forms of hatred and division, we can be assured that his Beloved Community was not a version of Bonhoeffer's naïve “wish dream,” but a real way for people to live together. According to Dr. King:

*“... end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends... it is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [people].”*

In this vision, opponents become friends, but not because they “agree to disagree.” King is speaking about not only reconciliation, but also redemption, the righting of wrongs. Whether in reference to racism, poverty or war, King was clear that the goal of the Beloved Community is never to simply avoid the issue. Peace, in King’s view, is “not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice.” King believed that justice could and would come—even if it took a miracle. After all, the God who raised Jesus from the dead is certainly a God who can “bring about miracles in the hearts” of human beings.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Where have you experienced Beloved Community?
8. Where have you witnessed minds and hearts being changed through compassion?

**CONCLUSION: FULLY KNOWN**

This summer, we have pondered together what it means to live “after certainty,” and how God invites us to go beyond certainty to find the *curiosity, community and compassion* in which we experience God’s certain promise of grace in Jesus Christ. Now we ask: How do these gifts of God relate to one another? How might they guide us in the hard conversations of our lives together?

In fractured and fearful times, the promise of certainty (hollow as it may be) is a great temptation. When the world seems hopeless—when we feel helpless, at least we can be *right* about it all. However, the semblance of control that certainty offers comes at a cost: the risk that we become judgmental, that we dismiss or alienate others, or even that we block those who are trying to learn and grow in exactly the ways we wish they would.

As an alternative to certainty, **curiosity** invites us to ask: What is the need that certainty is trying to fill? In the face of the unknown, what is the deepest longing of our hearts: To be right, or to be *enough*? Is it to be certain of the facts, or certain of *ourselves*—our belonging, our place in the world? What if our desire to know fully is (as Paul suggests) really our desire to be fully known, and to be loved for the fullness of who we are?

If our human tendency to cling to our rightness is actually rooted in our desire to be known and loved, this might explain quite a bit about us—and about our neighbors too. Do you remember the last time you found yourself at an impasse with someone about an important issue, having argued your respective points only to come away feeling more frustrated and disconnected than ever? Imagine how curiosity might reframe the conversation: *Tell me more about why this is important to you. How did you come to see things this way? Who are you thinking about in this conversation, and what is at stake for them?* Asking questions like this, even if only of ourselves, can help to ground us. In some cases, by God’s grace, curiosity might lead us to find some common ground.

Curiosity can also strengthen **community**. Taken to the extreme, a culture of certainty demands that people get it right the first time and every time—a recipe for disconnection, isolation and despair. Here, once again, King offers a helpful observation:

*I am convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don’t know each other and they don’t know each other because they don’t communicate with each other, and they don’t communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.*

King saw an antidote for this in *Beloved Community*, that space in which people are fully known and fully loved. Community is rooted not in the certainty of knowledge, but in the certainty of relationship, which allows for vulnerability, trust

and honesty in hard conversations.

The *beloved-ness* of the **community** is where compassion comes in. Choosing compassion over certainty, as Paul also urged the church to do, does not mean denying the truth. In fact, it's the opposite: Compassion can create the conditions for learning, raising awareness and a change of mind and heart. Wielding knowledge from a position of superiority makes sense if you are determined to be opponents. But if the goal is to be heard and understood, *love* is the better way.

Compassion also means being mindful of differences in position and perspective. For example, it is easier for me to talk about Israel/Palestine in a compassionate way because of the privilege I possess in these conversations. I am American, not Palestinian or Israeli; my identity and human rights are not up for debate. Yet as courageous friends in the Holy Land grow weary of explaining and defending their right to exist, I know that I can take up the conversation with others, especially other American Christians, precisely because of my identity. Mindful of Jesus' and Paul's teachings about responsibility in relation to power, compassion can help us to recognize the extra burden carried by community members whose lives are directly affected by an issue. Compassion helps us to respect their wisdom born of experience, as well as the strain this may place on their capacity for discussion or debate.

The Gospel proclaims that Jesus has released us from the burden of certainty. We do not and cannot fully know all things now. In the time to come, when we see "face to face" the truth revealed in God, we will receive all the insights we have yearned for. Those with whom we most vehemently disagree will also encounter the truth. And we may both be surprised! Accepting that it is not within our power to change every mind or bring about certainty all on our own, frees us to reach out to others with compassion. This, in turn, may soften hard hearts to receive the wisdom of Jesus, who taught us that love

is the heart of faith, the greatest commandment and the greatest of the abiding gifts of God.

In the meantime, one certainty remains: We are fully known and fully loved by God in Jesus Christ. May this gift of grace guide us beyond certainty to holy curiosity, community and compassion, in these times "after certainty," and in all times, now and forever.


**Share aloud or reflect:**

9. Reflecting on the entirety of this study, what will you take away from "After Certainty"?
10. How is God inviting you into curiosity, community and compassion?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

God of faith, hope and love, your grace and peace surpass our understanding. You promise that one day, we will know fully as we have been fully known. Send us out into the world in compassion for your beloved community. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**CLOSING HYMN**

"Although I Speak with Angel's Tongue"  
(ELW 644) 

# After certainty

## Session three

### Compassion

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

#### SESSION GOAL

To understand Jesus' teaching that love is the heart of faith, and consider how, when certainty gives way to compassion, God can heal human divisions and bring justice to the world.

#### OVERVIEW

Welcome to the third and final session of *Gather's* summer Bible study series, *After Certainty*. This series ponders what it means to live faithfully in times of uncertainty. We discuss how our ancestors in faith also lived in deep uncertainty—and how God leads us beyond certainty to the *curiosity* (June), *community* (July) and *compassion* (August) that can help us navigate uncertainty as people rooted in the certain love of God in Jesus Christ.

Session 3 dives deeper into sensitive territory: Politics, and how people of Christian faith can approach the harmful divisions that occur when human certainty becomes judgmentalism, or when certainty and power collide in ways that harm people.

It can be daunting in our current polarized climate to talk about this—especially in the setting of Christian community. Yet it is no secret that political divisions are affecting our churches, families and communities. I believe many of us are searching for a way through this turbulent climate. So take heart. Remember the words Jesus spoke often: “Do not be afraid!” Christians are not just called away from the world; we are sent into it, as members of the body of Christ. As the ELCA proclaims in our 1991 social

statement, *The Church in Society*:

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is called to be a part of the ecumenical Church of Jesus Christ in the context in which God has placed it—a diverse, divided, and threatened global society on a beautiful, fragile planet. In faithfulness to its calling, this church is committed to defend human dignity, to stand with poor and powerless people, to advocate justice, to work for peace, and to care for the earth in the processes and structures of contemporary society. (The Church in Society, p. 1, [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements))*

Not only are communities of faith called to consider political things, but we also have an advantage in these discussions. Our highest allegiance is not to a political party, nor to any national identity, but to the God of Jesus Christ, who makes us part of Christ's body in the world. With courage and care, we can reach beyond partisan conflicts to ask: What is God's calling for us in our communities? How can Jesus' lens of love guide us in our own personal and political lives?

#### PREPARE

• **Before the meeting, alert members to the fact that this month's session will address politics directly.**

However, tell members that rather than focus on specific politicians or political issues, this study considers how we approach political life, and how the compassion of Jesus can guide us.

• **Optional opening activity:**

Write “Compassion” on a whiteboard or large piece of paper. As participants gather before the meeting, invite them to write down or share aloud their definitions. Point out that their definitions will not be identical; yet everyone is describing the same idea. Invite them to keep this in mind as the conversations continue, and to ponder: *Where do we have common ground, even when we disagree?*



• **Set discussion guidelines:** No matter where you live and who is in your group, your political perspectives are likely to vary. Take time with your group at the beginning of the session, so that all can agree to follow these or similar guidelines for conversation:

1. Use “I” statements to describe your own perspectives.
2. Do not correct others’ perspectives but seek to better understand them.
3. Pay attention to the emotions beneath the opinions, what we and others feel, as well as what we think.

• **Allow time to pause and reflect:** As facilitator, you may need to shepherd the conversation if it delves too far into the particulars of a certain issue or into more heated debate. To prepare for this, you can bring a bell or chime to ring at set intervals in the conversation. Tell participants that every 10 or 15 minutes, the bell will sound once, signaling that it is time for the group to pause and consider: *Where is God present in this conversation?*

#### OPTIONAL WRAP-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Consider inviting members to lift up their favorite or most meaningful moments from all three sessions of “After Certainty.”
2. Consider bringing a collection of stones (one for each participant) with you to the session. Give every member one to hold as you read, discuss and pray. At the end of the session, use these stones in a closing prayer ritual (see box below).
3. If time allows, brainstorm with the group ways that you might share some of what you have learned with your congregation or community in the time leading up to the 2024 election. What resources for prayer, or for compassionate and courageous conversation, could help others? As guidance, explore the topics of the ELCA Social Statements: [www.elca.org/social-statements](http://www.elca.org/social-statements).

#### SHORT STUDY (30-45 MINUTES)

1. This session has more material than usual, so consider distributing the text ahead of time so group members can read the entire study before they come.
2. Ask each group member to name one section and one question they would like to discuss. Spend the remaining time discussing the sections and questions raised by the group.
3. Encourage participants to read, reflect and journal at home about parts of the study you did not have time to discuss during your meeting.

#### A LITTLE LONGER (60-90 MINUTES)

1. Do the opening prayer. Sing at least 1 verse of the hymn.
2. Read “Introduction.” Do Q1.
3. Do “Jesus’ logic of love” and Q3.
4. Read first four paragraphs of “Be of the Same Mind,” then “Compassion in Beloved Community.” Do Q8 if time allows.
5. Read “Conclusion.” Do Q10.
6. End with “Closing prayer.”

#### LONGER (90-120 MINUTES)

1. Read all sections. Do Qs 1, 3, 6, 8, and 10.
2. If time allows, add in one or two more questions (from Qs 2, 4, 5, 7 or 9).
3. As an alternative, consider doing the complete study as a half-day retreat with a luncheon. Use the shortening suggestions to limit each session to 60 minutes.

#### LARGER GROUPS

If your group is large enough, you may wish to try a “book report” format. After the opening prayer and hymn, break into smaller groups of 2-3 participants. Assign each group a different section to read and discuss for 30 minutes. Conclude with short presentations (perhaps 3 to 5 minutes) from each group on important takeaways from each section. 🌿