



## Story of Place and Displacement

Carol Jacobson, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

### **PRE-LESSON INFORMATION**

#### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

How does where you live make a difference for how you live and tell God's story? Learn how Jesus's attention to his context(s) and listener(s) shapes how he tells his story and receives theirs, and consider how attention to context and place presents both challenges and opportunities in sharing God's story with others.

#### **ELCA FAITH PRACTICES**

Invite

#### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

In this session, participants will:

- experience ways in which contexts influence the way we hear and tell God's story
- practice skills for reading their own ministry contexts
- weave together God's story and their own story

#### **BIBLICAL FOCUS**

Luke 15:11-32 – Parable of the Prodigal Son

#### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

- Computer, projector, and screen for PowerPoint that accompanies this session
- Ability to access and project video/sound that accompanies this session (if utilized). It is highly recommended that you download online videos prior to the presentation.
- Bible
- White board (or large paper) and markers for recording discussion and brainstorming
- Journals or paper and pens (ballpoints and markers) for independent writing

## LESSON PLAN

### SITUATIONS MATTER

Begin the lesson by asking participants to listen closely to the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32).

After listening to the story, participants should divide into groups of 3 or 4 to tell the parable back to each other from memory (**no using the Bible for this part!**).

Once they have told the story from memory, they should open their Bibles, look at the text together as a group and make note of what they remembered to include and what, if anything, they left out.

Next, the PowerPoint will detail the story of Mark Powell's experiment in interpreting this parable from three different contextual perspectives. The facilitator will read something like the following:

I want participants to engage the findings of Mark Powell's experiment in interpreting this parable from three contextual perspectives. Here's a summary of what he did and what he learned – taken from his book, *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*.

In chapter 2, Powell recounts an experiment with 12 American seminary students assigned to read the parable of the prodigal son and then recount it from memory, similar to the exercise we just completed.

Interestingly enough, not one of them mentioned the famine in verse 14. Powell says that he himself had always considered Jesus' reference to the famine as an insignificant detail, but he was surprised to see *all* of his American students forget it.

So he organized a study with 100 American students of different genders, races, ages, economic statuses, and religions. Out of 100 students, only 6 mentioned the famine in their retelling of Jesus' parable.

Curious about the influence of context on reading the parable, he went to St. Petersburg, Russia, and did the same experiment with 50 Russians. He was shocked when 42 of them remembered the famine. Only 6 out of 100 Americans, but 42 out of 50 Russians.

Even more interesting is the fact that many Russian readers made no reference to the prodigal son squandering his property! Almost every American student had mentioned that. People from these two cultures heard the emphases of the parable differently.

Then he asked a group of seminarians at Makumira Seminary in Tanzania, the question “Why is the young man hungry?” He was curious to see if they would answer more like the Americans – because he squandered all his money, or more like the Russians – because a severe famine struck the country.

But the Tanzanian seminarians answered in yet a third way: because no one gave him anything to eat. They were shocked by such a society – one that would let a stranger go hungry and not give him anything to eat.

Who had the right answer to the question about why the younger son was hungry? The Americans, Russians, or Tanzanians? Of course, they all did.

The PowerPoint continues with the presentation of Powell’s thoughts about Jesus’ context and how it influenced the way he told the parable. The transition could be something like:

Jesus tells this story to illustrate the kingdom of God and how it is different from the “far country”.

Everyone who heard Jesus tell this parable would be shocked by his depiction of a society – a country that would let a stranger go hungry and not give him anything to eat.

“The parable teaches that the kingdom of God is a society that welcomes the undeserving, and it puts the scribes and Pharisees to shame by showing them that they are like a society with no honor, that shows no hospitality to the stranger in its midst.” (Powell, 27)

In your original group of 3 or 4, brainstorm about how Jesus might change this parable (setting, plot, characters, etc.) if he were telling it today to folks in your context(s). For example, where is the “far country” in your context today? Who would the strangers be? What plot and characters make sense to witness to divine hospitality for all the least and lost?

Any groups that would like to share their suggested changes are welcome to, but if groups don’t want to share, they are not required to do so.

## **GOD'S STORY/OUR STORIES – WHAT'S EMERGING IN YOUR CONTEXT?**

*This segment utilizes the video that accompanies the session. A script with the video's content is provided in the appendix for leader use in preparing the lesson and for those who do not have access to or do not wish to utilize the video during the session.*

Play the video that accompanies this session.

Following the video, invite participants to turn to their neighbor and discuss:

When you think about sharing your stories and God's story in your ministry context, what challenges do you face, and what opportunities can you imagine?

## **GOD'S STORY/YOUR STORIES: WRITE YOUR OWN GOSPEL!**

All participants will need the capacity to make a list (such as a paper and pen, tablet, phone, etc.)

In the next 60 seconds make a list of all of the names for Jesus in the Bible that you can think of. Ready, set, go!

Take a few minutes to share the names with each other. Which name is the right one? Of course, they all are. For Matthew, Jesus is Emmanuel; for John, he is the Word made flesh. For Mark, Jesus is the Son of Man; and for Luke he is the Son of the Most High. How each of these Gospel writers chose to name Jesus depended a great deal on the contexts in which they lived, and the people to whom they were writing.

So now I invite us to close our time together by starting to write our own Gospel account – that is, our personal account of the intersections between our own story and God's story.

Follow these three easy steps to get started:

1. First, write down all the important parts of your story (events, ethnicity, economic status, geographical location, etc.) that can't be left out if people really want to understand who you are.
2. Next, take some time to list all the important parts of God's story that can't be left out if people want to understand who God really is.
3. Finally, consider the ways you see your story fitting together with God's story right now. How and when does this connection emerge in your life? How has it been nurtured and challenged so far?

Now you are well on your way to having the plot, characters, and ideas for constructing your own Gospel account. Consider:

Who can you think of who might need to hear your Gospel account? How can you imagine that happening?

And don't forget: Telling your Gospel account doesn't always mean only words and conversation. It means walking, living, and loving, too.

## **CLOSING THE CONVERSATION**

Thank the group for their participation and make any final remarks or announcements. End with a closing prayer.

## **SUGGESTED RESOURCES**

*The following are suggested as resources for further exploration of this session's topic.*

Ammerman, Nancy, et. al. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Merritt, Carol Howard. *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation*. The Alban Institute, 2007.

Powell, Mark Allan. *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*. Abingdon, 2007.

White, David F. *Practicing Discernment With Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Dr. Carol R. Jacobson is Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif. She holds degrees from Whitworth College in Spokane, Wash., and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif. Her research interests include Lutheran theologies from the global south; contextual faith formation in youth and adults; congregational studies; soteriology and eschatology; Christian education; and youth and family ministries. She is a member of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Oakland, where she lives.



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## Video Script – Story of Place and Displacement

*The following script is, generally speaking, the content contained in the video segment of this lesson, provided as information for those who cannot access or do not wish to utilize the video.*

STOP!!! Ignoring preconceived notions about what you “should” be doing better...

As leaders, consider...

- What are we already doing in our church community and larger community that seems to be working well (e.g. pastoral care, outreach, community service, specific worship styles)?
- What are the greatest (and/or most underutilized) gifts of our church community and larger community (people, space, other?)

Then discuss...

- What are the current limiting factors defining what stories could emerge?
- As a leader, what are you cultivating within your community? What are you holding back? Why?

Now listen to each other...

- What brought you to \_\_\_\_\_ and why did you decide to stay ?
- What is the most meaningful part of \_\_\_\_\_ for you?
- Where do you see God at work in \_\_\_\_\_?

And listen some more...

- Describe our group to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here.
- What kind of practical and cultural values are displayed and lived out in our group?
- If you were to leave this group for five years, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see?

Now, get to know the context...

- Research the demographic data available for your community’s immediate neighborhood

2010 Census: [quickfacts.census.gov](http://quickfacts.census.gov)

County/City websites

Association of Religious Data Archives: [thearda.com](http://thearda.com)

- Take a walking tour AND a driving tour of your community's neighborhood, making note of:
  - businesses and schools
  - housing types
  - other important natural, geographical, and residential data
  - ask *who/what is missing* that you might expect to see

Finally, consider who in your neighborhood is in need hospitality and a space to call home...