

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

JUSTICE ISSUE: POVERTY, ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WELCOME, AGEISM AND PARTICIPATION, DISABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY, BELONGING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION	
SCRIPTURE PASSAGE/ LECTIONARY WEEK:	Luke 2:22-40, Galatians 4:4-7
SOCIAL PRINCIPLES/ BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS REFERENCES:	Social Community, Community of All Creation
OBJECTIVE:	Youth will explore how the Christmas story reveals God’s presence among ordinary families and people who are often overlooked. Through Simeon and Anna, Paul’s message that we are children and heirs of God, the students will identify justice issues that affect belonging and consider practical ways their church and community can welcome, include, and value every person.
SUPPLIES NEEDED:	paper, pens, chairs arranged in a circle, one extra empty chair, ball of yarn or crumpled paper ball, Book of Resolutions/ SP on Immigrants and refugees (Resolution #4275 “Concerning Immigration,” Resolution #4276 “The United Methodist Church Is a Sanctuary Church,” Resolution #4271 “Welcoming the Migrant to the US,” Resolution #4270 “DREAM Act”), Social Principles ¶163, Basic Rights and Freedoms

LESSON PLAN STRUCTURE (1 HOUR)

CENTERING MOMENT (5 MINUTES)

Say: Welcome, everyone! Today is the First Sunday of Christmas. We may have already opened presents, shared meals, attended worship, or returned to our regular routines, but the Christmas story is not over.

Christmas celebrates the good news that God came among us in Jesus. Today, we’re going to ask what that means for the way we treat people. If God came among ordinary people and welcomed people who were often overlooked, what should that mean for our families, our church, our school, and our community?

NOTES

******Before the start of class, arrange the chairs (enough for all the participants) in a circle. Have one extra chair in the room to be used later in the lesson.

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

Let's begin with a quick check-in. You can share something good that happened this week, something you're looking forward to, or something that has been on your mind. You can also pass if you'd rather not share.

Pause for sharing.

Ask: Here's a question to think about as we begin.

Where do you feel like you belong most? Where do you sometimes feel like you don't belong? You might think about a team, a classroom, a friend group, your family, church, or another place in your life. You do not have to share anything personal or uncomfortable.

Pause for responses.

Say: Before we read Scripture, I want to give a quick content note. Today we'll talk about poverty, exclusion, and how communities welcome immigrants and refugees. These topics can connect to real experiences in people's lives and families. You are welcome to participate, listen quietly, or pass on a question. No one needs to explain their family's story or speak for an entire group of people.

Our goal is to think about how we can treat every person with dignity and make our communities more welcoming.

Pray: God of love and welcome, thank you for coming among us in Jesus. As we continue celebrating Christmas, help us recognize your presence in people we might overlook. Open our hearts to the experiences of others. Show us where our communities create barriers and give us courage to make room. Help us learn how to welcome others with the love you have first shown us. Amen.

SCRIPTURE STUDY (25 MIN.)

Say: Today's Gospel takes place after Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to the temple to fulfill the requirements of their faith.

As we listen, notice who recognizes Jesus, what they recognize, and why Luke might want us to notice these details.

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

Read Luke 2:22–38

Invite volunteers to read the passage aloud. You may divide the reading among a narrator, Simeon, and Anna where the translation allows.

Say: Let's pause and wonder about this story. There are no wrong answers. We're noticing what the story makes us think about.

Reflection Questions:

- Why does Luke mention the two birds? What do they symbolize?
- What do Simeon and Anna recognize about Jesus?
- Why might Luke highlight two older people instead of only focusing on the baby and his parents?
- What do Simeon and Anna notice that someone rushing through the temple might miss?

Say: Simeon and Anna have different experiences from the young family bringing Jesus to the temple. But they are not unimportant or left out of God's story. Their years of waiting, prayer, and faith help them recognize what God is doing.

This story also invites us to think about justice. Mary and Joseph's offering reminds us that not every family has the same financial resources. Simeon and Anna remind us that older adults have wisdom and gifts to share. And Jesus' place in this story reminds us that God's work does not depend on wealth, status, or social power.

Sometimes people are overlooked because they are poor, young, old, new to a community, or different from the majority. The Christmas story challenges us to notice those people and recognize their dignity.

Read Galatians 4:4–7

Say: Now let's hear a few verses from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul uses the language of slavery and adoption to describe what changes through Christ. As we listen, notice which word or phrase stands out to you.

NOTES

Luke tells us that they bring two birds as an offering. That detail matters. Leviticus 12:8 allowed a family to bring two birds if they could not afford a lamb. Luke is showing us that Jesus enters the world as part of a family with limited resources. Jesus is not born to wealth and is not presented through a display of wealth or power. He comes as a baby in an ordinary family.

At the temple, two older adults recognize something extraordinary about Jesus. Simeon has been waiting for God's promised salvation, and Anna has spent years worshiping, fasting, and praying. They see what others might have missed.

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

Read Galatians 4:4–7

Say: Paul says that through Christ, we are no longer slaves but children of God and heirs. An heir is someone who belongs to a family and shares in its inheritance.

Paul is telling the Galatians that their relationship with God is not defined by being outsiders or people who have to earn their place. Through Christ, they are welcomed into God's family.

That does not mean everyone has the same life or the same experiences. It means that our dignity and belonging come from God, not from how much money we have, how old we are, where we come from, or whether we agree about everything.

If we believe every person has God-given dignity, then we have to ask whether our communities reflect that belief. Do people have access to what they need? Are they welcomed regardless of their background? Are their voices heard? Do we make it possible for people with different abilities and resources to participate?

Ask:

“What changes in this passage when the word slave becomes child?”

Pause for responses.

Place one empty chair in the circle where everyone can see it.

Say: Let's look at our circle. Everyone here has a place, and there is one empty chair.

Imagine that this chair represents someone who is not here yet. It could represent a new student, a person who uses a wheelchair, a refugee family, someone who feels lonely, an older adult, or someone who has been made to feel unwelcome.

We are not trying to guess the story of a particular person. We are asking who might need a place in our community.

Ask: Who might this empty chair be for?

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

Pause for responses.

Say: Sometimes we say that everyone is welcome, but people can still have trouble participating. Maybe the building is difficult to enter. Maybe activities cost too much. Maybe a person does not speak the language everyone else uses. Maybe young people are invited to attend but never invited to help make decisions. Maybe a new family does not know how to become part of the community.

These are not just problems of politeness. They are also justice issues. Justice asks whether people have a fair opportunity to participate, whether their needs are considered, and whether their voices matter.

Welcome is more than saying, 'You can come in.' It also means asking, 'Can you participate? Can you be heard? Can you help shape what happens here?'

Say: Our United Methodist Social Principles help us think about how faith connects with the way we live together.

The Social Community section speaks to human dignity, inclusion, and our responsibility to care for one another. The Economic Community section addresses issues such as poverty and economic inequality. The Community of All Creation reminds us that God's care reaches beyond human beings to the whole created world.

The United Methodist Book of Resolutions also includes statements about welcoming immigrants and refugees. I'm going to read a short statement selected from that resource.

[Read the short, preselected statement. Identify its title or source for the group. Avoid presenting a paraphrase as a direct quotation.]

Say: As we listen to these commitments, remember that we do not need to know someone's whole story before treating them with dignity. We can begin by noticing whether our community makes it possible for people to belong.

For example, if a family is experiencing poverty, do we make sure that the cost of an activity does not prevent their children from participating? If someone is new to

NOTES

Before the session read the following Resolutions:

- 4275 "Concerning Immigration"
- 4276 "The United Methodist Church Is a Sanctuary Church"
- 4271 "Welcoming the Migrant to the US"
- 4270 "DREAM Act"

Social Principles ¶163, Basic Rights and Freedoms

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

our country or community, do we make an effort to welcome them? If a person has a disability, do we consider accessibility? If young people have ideas about what our church should do, do we listen to them?

Justice is not only about what we believe. It is also about what we do.

Discussion Questions:

- What is one thing that can make it hard for someone to feel welcome in a church or community?
- What is the difference between letting someone enter a room and helping them feel that they belong?
- What is one barrier our church or school could do something about?

Say: John Wesley preached a sermon called 'Catholic Spirit.' In this context, catholic means universal or inclusive; it does not mean the Roman Catholic Church.

Wesley believed that Christians can disagree about some things and still love God and care for one another. He expressed that spirit with the question, 'Is your heart as my heart? If it is, give me your hand.'

He was not saying that differences do not matter or that we should ignore injustice. He was reminding us that disagreement does not have to erase our connection or our responsibility to treat one another with love.

A catholic spirit asks us to keep listening and reaching out, even when someone sees the world differently from us.

Say: Let's practice that kind of spirit. Think of someone in this circle whose perspective, interests, experiences, or opinions differ from yours in some way. You do not have to agree with everything they say. Think of one quality you appreciate about them.

Pause for reflection.

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

Say: Turn to someone in the circle, or I can help pair people up. Take turns completing this sentence:

‘One thing I appreciate about you is...’

You can mention kindness, humor, courage, creativity, honesty, listening, or another quality you have genuinely noticed.

Say: After you share, you can offer a handshake, a fist-bump, or another gesture that feels comfortable to both people. You can also simply say, ‘Thank you.’ No one has to touch anyone else.

Pause for activity.

Say: John Wesley’s question invites us to reach out across differences. We do not have to be identical to belong to God’s family. And when we see people being excluded, our faith calls us not only to be friendly but also to work toward a community where everyone has a genuine opportunity to belong.

GROUP ACTIVITY (25 MIN.)

Build the Web

Invite everyone to stand or remain seated in a circle. If using yarn, hold the end securely and explain how to toss the ball gently. For a small room or a group that prefers not to toss yarn, use a crumpled paper ball or pass it carefully.

Say: We have been talking about belonging as a place in a circle. Now we’re going to create a picture of how we are connected.

We’ll use this ball of yarn to build a web. The first person will name one gift, quality, or way of contributing that they bring to a community. For example, you might say, ‘I listen well,’ ‘I make people laugh,’ ‘I ask questions,’ or ‘I notice when someone is left out.’

Hold the end of the yarn, then gently toss the ball to someone else. That person will name one of their own gifts, hold on to the yarn, and pass the ball to another person.

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

We'll keep going until everyone has had a turn. You can name a small gift. You do not have to choose something impressive, and you can pass if you need to.

Model the activity by naming a quality and holding the end of the yarn. Continue until each participant has had an opportunity to contribute. Help participants who need support and make sure no one is left out.

Pause for the activity.

Say: Take a look at what we have made. Each person has contributed something, and the strands connect us. No one made the whole web alone.

Our gifts are different, but they all contribute to the community. Some gifts are easy to notice, and others become clear only when we spend time together.

Say: I'm going to ask one person to gently loosen or release their strand while the rest of us hold ours safely. Please do not pull hard or wrap the yarn around your hands.

Invite one volunteer to release their strand. Observe how the web changes. If the web does not visibly sag, ask participants to describe what changes when one connection is removed.

Discussion Questions:

- What happened to the web when one strand was released?
- What does this help us understand about belonging?

Say: When someone is left out, the whole community changes. That does not mean one person is responsible for holding everything together. It means every person matters, and our connections need care.

Think back to Galatians. Paul reminds us that through Christ we are children and heirs of God. Our belonging is not a prize we win by being the most talented, the most popular, or the most successful. We are invited into God's family by grace.

Anna and Simeon show us that people who have spent many years waiting and

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

praying have something to contribute. Mary and Joseph remind us that a family with limited resources is part of God's story. Paul reminds us that God's family is not built around a hierarchy of people who matter more and people who matter less.

Discussion Questions:

- Who might be missing from the web in our church, school, or community?
- What can happen when a person is invited to attend but is not given a voice?
- What is one barrier that might prevent someone from participating, and how could we help remove it?

Say: Let's bring our empty chair back into the picture. Think about one person or group of people who might have a harder time feeling that they belong. You do not need to share a personal story or identify anyone by name.

Now finish this sentence:

'At our church, one way to make room is...'

It might be listening to young people before making decisions, making an activity accessible, helping a new family find its way around, learning how to welcome someone who speaks another language, including older adults in conversations, or finding a way to support people experiencing hunger.

Pause for sharing.

Say: Notice that these are practical actions. We cannot solve every problem in one day, but we can make a real difference in how people are welcomed and included.

Our United Methodist tradition teaches that grace comes first: God loves us before we have earned anything. Our response is to cooperate with that grace by loving our neighbors and making room for others.

Anna practiced her faith through prayer and fasting, which are examples of works of piety, practices that help us grow closer to God. We can also let prayer shape the way we act. We pray, we pay attention, and then we take steps to live out God's welcome.

FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS CONT'D

As we continue celebrating Christmas, we remember that God came among us in Jesus. Our response is to help make God's love visible in the way we treat people and care for creation.

CLOSING MOMENT (5 MIN)

Pray: God of welcome and grace,

Thank you for coming among us in Jesus. As we continue celebrating Christmas, remind us that your love reaches people who are often overlooked.

Thank you for the wisdom of Simeon and Anna, for Mary and Joseph's faithfulness, and for the reminder that we are your children and heirs.

Teach us to build communities where people are invited to participate, contribute, and be heard. Help us care for families, young people, older adults, and all who need a place to belong. Teach us also to care for the whole creation that praises you.

May our words and actions reflect your generous grace. Help us turn the joy of Christmas into lives of welcome, compassion, and justice.

In Jesus' name, Amen."