

Sermon: Bethlehem and Zion. July 27. Curtis Olson

John Chapter 14. We're in the middle of the last supper. Jesus has just told his followers that he is leaving them, that one of them will betray him, and all of them will deny him. Not joyful tidings.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," he says. Why NOT? How can they NOT have troubled hearts with this news that he has given them?

Jesus continues: "You believe in God; believe also in me."

"My Father's house has many rooms." says Jesus.

When I first met Annie's mother, I was, at the time, identifying as a Buddhist. Mary received this news with her typical accepting equanimity. Anyone who knew her, and all of the older women of Bethlehem Church, knew that THEIR Jesus was an accepting Jesus, who met, talked with, ate with, and embraced the marginalized people in his time and place. The tax collectors, the prostitutes, the "least of these": the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the stranger. This generation extended that same grace when the congregation considered contributions to Oaks Indian Mission, to prison ministries, and when the ELCA considered the question of gay clergy.

Mary considered my alternative faith, and paraphrased Jesus per above. "There are many rooms in His house....room for all."

I am certain that she knew the subsequent verses, but did not choose to extend the quote.

"What is the way?" asks the disciple Thomas. How can we get to this expansive house prepared by God?

"I" says Jesus, "am the way...and the truth, and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me."

That is a heck to a record scratch for anyone who thinks of Jesus and sees the all-embracing arms of grace and acceptance.

Psalm One in our reading today also divides rather than embracing. This psalm describes those who delight in the law of the Lord. They thrive like well-watered

trees, prospering and bearing fruit. Then there are the others, the “wicked.”
“They are like chaff that the wind drives away.

So what is to happen to those who do not embrace the law of the Lord - those who do not recognize Jesus as the pathway to that house of many rooms?: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists (even the lapsed ones), and those who doubt the existence of God in a world of pain and suffering....

Discussions at the Nebraska Lutheran Synod Assembly that Annie and I attended in June gives some guidance to the modern Lutheran. I will give you a brief report on the gathering of representatives from ELCA churches statewide. There were resolutions to refine nuances of the Bishop election process, another to guide the process of congregation constitutions. Due to some very minor and specific issues, neither of these passed as written.

Let me report from the Assembly on those resolutions that DID pass:

Resolution 2025 dash one DID cite the Jesus who instructs us to show our neighbor mercy, who blesses the merciful and peacemakers, and who calls us in baptism to serve all people.

Quote: “We commit we commit ourselves to standing up for the rights and dignity of all God’s beloved children, especially for our siblings of color, our queer and transgender siblings, our migrant and refugee siblings, our hungry and homeless siblings, our siblings with disabilities, and all our siblings whose rights are being threatened.”

Passed without nays.

To report further: Resolution 2025-3 resolved that:

“...congregations of the Nebraska Synod be encouraged to offer a clarification as we read and interpret scripture concerning the occurrences of “Israel” in our ancient stories as well as in the gospels, letters, and the book of Acts (such as “When we refer to “Israel,” we are not referring to the current State of Israel, but to the people of God as a whole and all the faithful, Jew and Gentile, from any and every age who wrestle with God's call and live in God's promises.”

The submitting working group wished to differentiate the people of our faith and the peoples of the Old Testament living in the holy land in biblical times

contrasted with the current government of the land designated as Israel who are engaged in ethnic cleansing, starvation, and genocidal behavior toward the historical native residents of that holy land.

This also passed overwhelmingly. In fact, the Nebraska Synod's commitment to solidarity with the Palestinian people was so strong, that Kearney in June, of all places, was the only place I could think so where, had I brought it, I would have felt comfortable wearing my Palestinian scarf.

There are four gospels, and they are NOT consistent. And certainly the Old Testament and the New Testament offer very different Gods to us. We may choose specific quotes from the Bible to follow and embrace, and choose to ignore or even REJECT other passages. In fact, the diverse voices of the testaments FORCE us to do this.

Our brothers and sisters in the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church professes to follow the gospels in their rule that women may not be ordained. (It is mostly, I think, the BROTHERS who have chosen this.) In the ELCA, we have followed our own interpretation to allow the blessing ordination of women, including our own remarkable Pastor Kris.

As Christians, as a Lutheran denomination, and as individual people, we walk through our daily lives in the world, deciding every day, hour-by-hour: Who is to be our fruit tree, watered and nurtured, and who is to be our chaff, driven away in the wind?

This leads me to a half-remembered quote that I googled, looking for the original source:

"It is our choices that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities."

I know that this sentiment has been expressed by wiser and older philosophers of the human condition, but Google kept telling me that the source of this quote is JK Rowling – author of the Harry Potter series.

In a classic, **Christian**, choice, JK Rowling's views on trans women lead me to cast her into the chaff-filled wind. But the wisdom of Albus Dumbledore's statement, I will embrace.

The hundreds of personal choices that we make every day are guided by so many things:

by authorities and rules

by the media that we consume

by our families - and their choices and opinions

... and a thousand experiences and choices – good and bad – that we have been exposed and subjected to over the course of our years on Earth.

Can I tell you what choices to make or how to choose?

No. I cannot.

Can I be another influence in your life that nudges you away from the Jesus that tells the disciples HE is the only pathway to God?

I hope that I can.

The sick, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the immigrant, the stranger...They are not chaff.

The Jesus of Matthew chapter 25 tells us to embrace these people in need, and when we do, we embrace Him.

You see these people every day: the Gazan on the news, the unhoused person in the parking lot, the undocumented immigrant harvesting your food, the parolee serving you in a restaurant, the immigrant cutting your hair (or at least for me this week, cutting MY hair, but that is a whole other sermon!)

77% of asylum seekers in the US today are Christians. One in 12 professed Christians living in our country today are at risk for deportation because of new policies related to immigration.

As you walk the world this week and in the coming months, embrace the embracing Jesus.

Embrace the chaff.

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