

4/6/25

Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”

Esther 4: 9-17, Romans 14: 7-12,

Matthew 7: 1-11

As I begin preaching, let me say up front that Pastor Giuseppe did not ask me to preach; our Council President, Steve Miller, did not ask me to preach; even the RIC Core Team did not ask me to preach. I volunteered to preach today because I am passionate about the topic at hand. Like the prophet Jeremiah, I have fire in my bones—I just hope the sanctuary doesn’t burn down (which happened in one of my previous churches)!

Dear church family, we live in tumultuous times. These are not the only stressful times in history, nor will they be the last. One such time is recorded in the Old Testament book of Esther. The Jews of Judea had been taken captive in Babylon. The new Persian king, Xerxes, had chosen an unknown-to-him Jewish orphan as his queen—Esther, when the king’s advisor, Haman, formed a plot to kill all the Jews in the empire. Mordecai, Esther’s cousin, pleads with her to intervene to stop the genocide, but the queen is reluctant because she risks her life by approaching the king without an invitation. Mordecai presses her with the words: **“Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”** Esther finally agrees to go to the king with the resignation, **“If I perish, I perish.”**

I have thought much about that text in the past few weeks. We, too, live in troubling times when people around us are fearful of their futures. And we, too, have become unlikely children of royalty, belonging to the kingdom of God and our Lord, the Prince of peace. Are not we also called together to make a difference **for just such a time as this?**

Before I ever knew that Weeki Wachee existed, before I ever heard of Nativity Lutheran Church, before I ever set foot in this sanctuary; the Council of this congregation, with encouragement from then Pastor Kristen Wee, had adopted our Values Statement in 2007, offering a welcome to everyone regardless of church office, financial standing, educational level, race, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability or any other distinction. It is because of that Values Statement that my wife Jill and I joined this congregation more than a decade ago. We wanted a place to belong, not just for us ourselves, but for everyone who wanted a church home. In these many years with you, we have come to love and appreciate you and would never think about going anywhere else.

We know we are a welcoming people, but many beyond these walls do not. Today we have a chance to consider sharing the good news that Nativity Lutheran Church is truly a place to belong for all God's children.

How many of you remember the days when people were kind and considerate of others—a time when children and young adults gave up their seats to the elderly, a time when drivers slowed down to let you in instead of trying to run you off the road, a time when people gave store clerks the benefit of the doubt and store managers taught that “the customer was always right.”? The future looked so bright back then, didn't it? Neighbors looked out for each other. The poor and mentally challenged were treated with special care. Nobody from a good home was rude to strangers or made fun of those who were different. Those were the so-called “good old days.” Sometimes I wonder whether they really existed...or were they just a dream?

Those of us who experienced those days are privileged, indeed. Isn't that what we would want for our church, so that at least in this sacred space everyone would find a home where they are loved and cared for? A lot of congregations have a sign out front declaring, “Visitors Welcome.” Well, let me let you in on a little secret from personal experience, “Just because they say it doesn't mean they mean it!” I've been to churches with a sign like that, and not one person in the congregation welcomed me! How do we, then, become a place for all people to belong?

In our lesson from Romans today, the Apostle Paul helps us to understand what it means to be welcoming to all people. If we truly want to be a place for all to belong, we need to know two things.

The first thing is this: We are all in this thing called life together.

Paul writes, “**We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.**” We are not lone rangers in this life. We travel in a herd. It all began back in Genesis when God told Adam, “**It is not good that man should be alone.**” We are gregarious beings. Even those of us who are introverts need others; we need a family who cares about us. In my 35 years of ministry I discovered that the most motivating factor for joining a church was to find a family—especially in Florida! Maybe that's why you are here. You're looking for a family. We need each other.

Ole and Lena are good Lutherans from Northern Minnesota where I'm from. One night Ole is staggering home from the bar, weaving from side to side on the sidewalk, when his pastor sees him and, like a good Samaritan, offers to guide the intoxicated man back home. As they approach the house, Ole suggests that the minister come inside for a moment. “I yust vant Lena to see who I've been out vit tonight,” he says.

Sticking together makes life easier. I don't know any of us who can make it through life without calling for backup. Life is too threatening, too challenging, too frightening, too lonely to do on our own. We should never take for granted the presence of other people in our lives—especially those God has placed closest to us.

One of my favorite authors, James Mitchener, once said, “I was born to a woman I never knew and raised by another who took in orphans. I do not know my background, my lineage, my biological or cultural heritage. But when I meet someone new, I treat them with respect...For after all, they could be my people.”

I've always loved that quote. Just recently I discovered that Joe Kleiber, our head usher, and I are related! My great-great grandfather and his great-great-great grandmother were siblings. We are family! It is said that if we go back eight generations in our heritage, we are all related. You know what that means, dear people? Those people around you today, the ones that you love as well as the ones that irritate the heck out of you, are all your kinfolk! And we have millions more out there beyond these walls. That's the whole point. We are all in this life together. More than that, we are all related by virtue of the cross of Christ whose blood makes us one. What does 'being one in Christ' mean? It means we need to take care of each other.

A few paragraphs before our reading from Paul today, the Apostle writes, **“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”** Now some of you may have had the experience of a “long lost relative” dropping in on you or at least emailing you and asking for a handout. If we're *all* related, that could be a bit overwhelming! On the other hand, to love others is to offer them the best that we have. What is that best?

One of the members of my last church in Ohio was arthritic and couldn't walk much any longer. Although never married or a mother, Faye still had a heart for children. She pondered what she might do to make the world a better place even with little money and poor health. She had one gift to offer—she could crochet. Faye heard about some poor kids in Cincinnati who were going to school in the winter without any gloves or mittens, so she started her mission. Faye asked church members to bring in their unwanted yarn, and she began crocheting up a storm. The first year she made 28 sets of hats, scarves, and mittens for kids. The next year she got a call from a teacher in Cleveland, and she whipped out 100 sets for those classes. Soon she was crocheting for children around the world, hundreds of sets a year from a poor, arthritic, diabetic lady from Sugarcreek, Ohio. Why was she so intent on helping strangers? Because she understood that we are all in this life together! Isn't that why the Crafty Ladies group makes quilts to send all over the world to comfort those in distress? Isn't that why the Sarah Circle makes prayer shawls for those in the local drug rehab program? Isn't that why the Women

of Nativity celebrate those who graduate from court supervision, why the Days for Girls chapter sends feminine hygiene products around the globe, why our church buys Christmas presents for the children of inmates and shoes for the children of migrants in Dade City? According to the Scriptures, we owe everyone love, and love takes many expressions. Our caring is limited only by a lack of vision. Anything is possible!

In the last couple of years we have helped the homeless in our woods. We have given them food and water, electricity and clothing. These things were well received, but do you know what I learned in all of this? Just this: What the homeless most appreciated was not the things we gave them, needed as they were. No, what meant the most to them was the time we spent with them. We bonded with them not through our donations but through listening to them and hearing their stories and helping them through some rough emotional moments in their lives—through doing the very thing families do for each other.

The Trevor Project is a non-profit organization that seeks to help youth. In a recent update, they reported on Florida's LGBTQ youth. In the past year 67% of them experienced anxiety, 54% experienced depression, 63% experienced discrimination, 34% of them were physically threatened or harmed because of who they are, 37% contemplated suicide, and 11% of them (one out of every 10) actually tried to take their own lives. How could I not care about these kids? These are my people!

Our world is full of hurting people, lonely people, delightful people, creative people, lost people, rejected people, searching people, beautiful people. They are all part of us.

A couple of weeks ago Pastor Giuseppe spoke about how God loves “the least, the lost, and the last.” Sometimes we need to pay special attention to those who are in these categories because they have been so often neglected. They are part of our family, too.

I just celebrated a birthday this past week. I don't know about you, but as I grow older, I think more about my legacy, about what really matters. None of us are getting out of this life alive! The question is “What will we leave behind us? What memory or cause or deed will be our legacy?”

More than a century ago, Poet Emily Dickinson wrote these words:

“If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain:
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.”

Many times in the Old Testament God is portrayed as a mother hen who gathers her people under her wings. How many people out there have ‘fallen out of the nest,’ so to speak? Lonely people, discriminated youth, people who look different from us, LGBTQ kids...Can we help them come back home? We are all in this thing called life together.

Secondly, if we truly want to be a place for all to belong, we need to remember that Christ died for everyone. Paul wrote, **“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”**

Jesus died for one reason: We needed a Savior!

A drunken man gets on the bus late one night, staggers up the aisle, and sits next to an elderly woman. She looks up at the man in disgust and says, “I’ve got news for you. You’re going straight to hell!”

“Oh, man,” cries the fellow as he jumps up out of his seat and yells, “Stop! I’m on the wrong bus!”

In the third chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul gives us the bad news: **“There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** We’re all in the same boat—the whole lot of us! Our whole human family is a bunch of sinners! But there is good news, there is Gospel! Five chapters later Paul says triumphantly, **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

It doesn’t matter who you are; it doesn’t matter where you come from; it doesn’t even matter what you have or have not done; for those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation. All are free. We’ve all heard this mantra: “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” But this is the one exception. Skeptical though we may be, because of Christ, we are ransomed, redeemed, restored, reprieved from judgment. This is the meaning of Jesus’ words to the poor and downtrodden of his day, **“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”** We don’t have to beat ourselves up any more for the mistakes and sins of the past!

Why did God do this for us? Because he loves us! Author Brennan Manning explained what this meant when he wrote, “In loving us God makes us lovable.” You know what this means? Because God loves all people, all people are lovable! It has nothing to do with whether or not we like them, nothing to do with what they have or don’t have, nothing to do with what they have done or not done, nothing to do with what they can or cannot become. It’s simply this: God loves them, so they are lovable...and if they are lovable and part of our family, we who owe love had better get our act together and love them, too!

A lot of people in this world are starving for love. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield made a career of putting himself down. He quipped, “I asked my old man if I could go ice-skating on the lake. He told me, ‘Wait until it gets warmer.’” Rodney complained, “It’s tough being married. My wife kisses the dog on the lips, yet she won’t drink from my glass!”

Those remarks make us laugh, yet a lot of people have experienced that kind of rejection at home and school, work, and even the church. Even the church can be abusive. Even religion can be toxic—religion that makes people believe that God won’t accept them until they fulfil some kind of requirement, until they change who they are, until they become what somebody else thinks they should become. We don’t need to be a church like that! That’s not the Gospel message!

In our hymnal there is a song entitled “Will You Come and Follow Me.” One of the verses begins, “Will you love the you you hide if I but call your name?” Those are profound words! How many of us are hiding a part of us for fear that God will reject us? How has the church taught people to hide their true selves for fear of being rejected?

Dear family, do you understand what I am saying? Because Christ died for everyone, we can never see our church as some kind of private club with rules about who can and cannot belong. *We* do not determine who is acceptable to God. For that matter, we can’t even predict who the next saint will be. I have seen the poor become rich and bless the church, and I have seen the rich become so poor in spirit that they become stingier with every passing year. I have seen the rejects of society become church pillars and the pillars of society fall on their faces. If we don’t even know people’s hearts, much less their futures, how could we ever become gatekeepers for the kingdom of God? We should be swinging open the church doors wide so that all can enter. Christ died for everyone.

Paul drives home the futility of deciding who can come to Jesus with these words, **“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. As it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”** Where did Paul get this radical view? From the teachings of Jesus! In our Gospel lesson Jesus tells the crowds, **“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”**

For many people in the church, it’s hard not to judge the LGBTQ community. I understand that. I grew up in a small town in the middle of nowhere, where Friday-night excitement consisted of going to a cheap movie and cruising up and down the two blocks of Main Street with the idiotic expectation that, if you turned around at the end and went back through again, you might see something

different! We never talked about gay people in our church; the only people who spoke about them were kids in school who made fun of gay people. I left that town, suspicious of people I didn't understand. But by the time I left seminary, I was thinking, "Who am I to decide who is good enough to worship God?" And in my first church I was holding open the door for LGBTQ people. Even so, I was still struggling over what I felt in my heart and what I thought the Bible seemed to say. It took me 20 years of Bible study to realize that those passages used so often to keep people from the church have nothing to do with sexuality or gender. They are about abuse and violence. That's why I taught a study on that two years ago. Yet, it's hard to give up what we learned as kids, isn't it? But what if we have drawn the wrong conclusions.

One Sunday the preacher decided to use a visual demonstration to emphasize his sermon. As he began to preach, the pastor put four worms into four separate jars. He put the first worm into a jar of whiskey; the second into a jar filled with cigarette smoke; the third into a jar of Hershey's syrup; and the fourth into a jar of good rich soil...At the conclusion of the sermon the pastor reported the results: the worm in the alcohol—dead! The worm in the cigarette smoke—dead! The worm in the chocolate syrup—dead! The worm in the good soil—alive! Then the preacher asked the congregation, "What did you learn from this demonstration?"

An elderly lady sitting in the back raised her hand and replied, "As long as you drink, smoke, and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

The wrong conclusion? Maybe that's where the church has been so often! We regularly misjudge those we don't understand. I think the reason there are so many more allies of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community today than forty years ago is because many more of us have personal relationships with them—a child or grandchild, a church member or friend. I read just this week that 10% of our country's population now identifies as LGBTQ!

Do you know why some people are attracted to other people? I don't! It can't be simply for good looks or a lot of us would have been left loveless. I mean, do you remember what you looked like in those high school photos? I don't know about you, but I looked like a dork (that was the term for 'geek' back then). Jill, on the other hand, "Ooh, la, la!" Good thing she saw beyond my dorkiness!

If I can't understand how someone could love *me*, how could I ever understand how someone loves somebody else either? To be perfectly honest with you, I don't really understand transgender because I'm not in that body, but I have transgender friends and this much I know, I'm not called to *understand* people who are different from me. I'm only called to *love* them. Every one of us is a mixed bag of contradictions. The Apostle Paul himself blurted out to the Romans, "**I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.**" If we can't even understand ourselves, how could we ever begin to

understand others. How many of you married people really understand your spouses! And if God loves us even if we don't understand ourselves, does not God also love those we don't understand?

Well, what about this? Are we singling out the LGBTQ community and those who are not born with our same skin tone for special treatment? That's often the argument made for withholding an outstretched arm. To that I would ask, "Why, then, do we welcome people in Spanish on our PowerPoint in worship? And why do we have the menu of food pantry items in Spanish? Couldn't someone say that *that* was giving preference to one group?" Do you see the problem with this argument? We do what we do to make it easier for those who come to feel at home among us, especially if they are likely to have been hurt in the past.

I'm reading a devotional book in German and came across this beautiful thought, "Heilige sind Menschen, durch die es den anderen leichter wird, an Gott zu glauben." Translated this means, "Those who make it easier for others to believe in God are saints." That's what I want for myself and for our church—to make it easier for all people to come to God. I'm not worried much about those who have no interest in the faith. My desire is to broadcast our welcome so that all those who *want to* worship God and serve Christ will find us. I want to make this a place for all to belong. How about you? I remember hearing these words of poet Robert Frost when I was a child: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Isn't this home?

A personal story in closing: I met Pastor Kristen Wee in 2008, five years before both she and I retired. I knew we were kindred spirits because she always had a heart for all people, especially those society often mistreated. Once I invited Kristen to join with my congregation in an inclusive event for the community. She replied, "I'm with you, but Nativity isn't there yet." 'Yet' is the operative word.

At today's Special Congregational meeting we will consider modifying our Values Statement. Why? The original statement was adopted by a Council decision. How much more meaningful it would be for the whole congregation to approve the statement! I don't know your mind, but I want everyone to know the acceptance, warmth, and welcome that I have found in this congregation. I want to be able to invite everyone I meet and not be afraid that someone will make them feel uncomfortable here. I hope that is what you desire, too.

Kristen has gone to her heavenly reward, but the fire that burned in her burns in me, too. In this turbulent world that wants to segregate and separate and even threaten those who are not like they are, it is time—time to be exceptionally different because we belong to Jesus—it is our time. We are here for such a time as this.

Amen.