

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14)

Amen

There are times when we are called to trust and to let go of preconceived notions of right and wrong, good and evil, of what is beautiful and what is ugly, and even of what is benevolent and what is wicked. For instance, all of you are most likely familiar with the classic film, *The Wizard of OZ*. If you watched that film at least once, you probably would feel confident that you could make a few value judgments. Let’s see if I am right about this. Please call out the first word that comes to mind when I say the following:

The Witch of the West (wicked)

Glinda (Good)

The Wizard (benevolent/ helpful)

Flying Monkey’s (bad/ scary)

According to the movie your interpretation would be correct, but things are not always what they appear to be. At least that is the premise behind the Broadway Hit, *Wicked*, that I, along with two dozen other members from Holy Trinity were privileged to experience during our youth trip to New York City this past July. *Wicked* makes you rethink everything we know about *OZ*. The plot goes something like this: We meet Elphaba, the green skinned older daughter of the mayor of Munchkin Land who is caring for her sickly younger sister Nessarose. She is invited to study magic at Shiz University and has a rather tough time of it between worrying about her sister and being ridiculed

for...well...being green. Her princess of a roommate, the very blonde Glinda comes across as arrogant, superficial and later proves to be a cunning opportunist. Early on in the play, Elphaba learns that there is an Animal Suppression Policy at the school and throughout OZ. Up until recently animals coexisted peacefully with humans and had the ability to speak and enjoyed complete freedom. Now animals were disappearing and they were restricted and even caged. Elphaba's concern for equality and justice for all animals is as clear as her concern for her ill sister. She is further shocked and horrified upon discovering that The Wizard is responsible for the policy and that he even imprisoned Doctor Dillamond, a goat, and the last animal left on the faculty. (It is also interesting to note that Dr. Dillamond wore preaching tabs on his shirt indicating that he was a member to the clergy- although that was never explicitly acknowledged!) Due to his caged imprisonment, Dr. Dillamond even lost his ability to speak, a byproduct of oppression. Elphaba vows to reverse the injustice, but is demonized by the Wizard who was also in control of the official press and news media. She is then labeled with the name "The Wicked Witch of the West." Meanwhile, Glinda seems less morally bound than her roommate Elphaba and in all of the commotion sees the possibility for her own career advancement and seizes it. She does however make some kind overtures toward Elphaba, acknowledging her as a friend, a role that takes a while for her to grow into and embrace. But perhaps befriending someone we perceive to be so different from us is a slow process. So to quickly summarize, The Wicked Witch of the West, is actually the kind, caring Elphaba. Glinda the good witch is really an opportunist who is just getting around to doing some good here and there. The Wizard is not only a sham; he is Wicked. In my research I came across a bit of irony that I am not even sure the directors were

aware of. The entomological root for the word wicked comes from the Old English word Wicca which means wizard! So I guess you could say wizards are wicked by definition. Oh yea, and flying monkeys are just flying monkeys.

Jesus seemed to always challenge his followers to trust him and to see new truths and new realities, beyond their preconceived notions. By now in the sixth chapter of John, the disciples think they know Jesus' mode of operation. He is powerful; multiplying loaves and fish, healing the sick, and mysteriously crossing stormy seas. He will be, they believe, their meal ticket and their protection. Then Jesus starts this crazy talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and he is insistent about it! This is out of their realm of expectation and they are bothered by his cannibalistic words.

Jesus asks the question, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" In effect telling them that they haven't seen anything yet- wait till the cross! The word that is translated as offend is skandalizo in the Greek from which we get the word scandalize. Literally it means to cause someone to stumble and to distrust someone they ought to trust; to be annoyed, displeased and indignant. The word that we know as scandal meaning malicious gossip is a reborrowing from the 1600's from what it means to be literally a dis-grace.

What are some of the things that we find offensive? What do we feel threatened by? What do we find scandalous? Do these things cause us to stumble in faith? What issues make us distrust someone or something that we ought to trust in? What annoys us and

displeases us causing us to be indignant? Senseless killing? War? Poverty? Premature death of a loved one? Suffering? Inequality? Injustice? Someone wearing plaid and pinstripes together? (just making sure all are awake!)

The way that we view sexuality is the product of many factors such as what we were taught by our parents and teachers; information gleaned through reading, studying and the media; and of course though our own personal experiences and relationships. Do any of us understand the complex subject of sexuality in its entirety? I believe, as Saint Paul writes in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians, that “We see through a glass dimly...” and that all of our answers are incomplete. With that said however, often our moral opinions on matters of intimacy are strong opinions which are not easily negotiated. Last week I informed the congregation that during the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Church Wide Assembly, our church would be considering a social statement for adoption as a teaching document for the church. In a letter addressed to all ordained and rostered leaders of the ELCA which I received yesterday, our Presiding Bishop, Mark Hanson had the following to say,

*“...The assembly adopted 676-338 -- precisely two-thirds of those voting -- “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” the ELCA’s 10th social statement, with minor editorial amendments. It also adopted a series of implementing resolutions with amendments. This theological and teaching document builds on the key Lutheran principles of justification by grace and Christian freedom to serve the neighbor. It emphasizes that central to our vocation, in relation to human sexuality, is the building and protection of trust in relationships. It therefore affirms that we are called to be trustworthy in our human*

*sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive. The social statement addresses marriage, same-gender relationships, families, protecting children, friendships, commitment, social responsibility and moral discernment. Regarding same-gender committed relationships, the social statement says that this church is not in agreement and recognizes the different perspectives which are present among us.*

*Our assembly also adopted resolutions proposed by the Church Council based on those contained in a “Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies.” The actions direct that changes be made to churchwide policy documents to make it possible for those in committed same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA...*

*I invite you into important, thoughtful, prayerful conversation about what all of this means for our life in mission together. What is absolutely important for me is that we have this conversation together...”*

Undoubtedly some will say, as the many followers of Jesus said in our gospel lesson, “This is a difficult teaching.” Some may even abandon the conversation and leave the ELCA. Being faithful is never easy. But perhaps even those who lament this decision now can with God’s help continue to trust in the Body of Christ and the expression of that Body known as the ELCA. In the first lesson for today we recalled that Joshua asks the tribes of Israel to make a decision about who they will serve. Since many of their ancestors worshiped other gods, it may have been difficult to choose against family tradition or values. But when the time for the decision came, the people of Israel announced, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it

is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed... Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

For those who celebrate the social statement and subsequent resolutions adopted by our Church Wide Assembly, these actions are viewed as a liberating action benefiting God’s people. For those who disagree, perhaps recalling how God has liberated you and loved you through this church can help you to trust during this difficult time. Like Peter, we have all heard Jesus’ words of eternal life here in this place- here in this church... So how could we go away from here? Where could we go?

While at his dinning room table in January of 1538 Luther stated that the Church is in the form of a Servant “...the philosophers are offended by the form of the church, which is subject to scandals and sects, because they think of the church as pure, holy, unspotted, and the dove of God. It’s true that the church has this appearance in God’s sight, but in the eyes of the world the church is like its bridegroom Christ: hacked to pieces, marked with scratches, despised, crucified, mocked.”

Our Lord underwent tremendous suffering and death for speaking out against inequality, injustice, hypocrisy, oppression and for extending a loving and healing touch to those beloved children of God that society deemed to be unworthy. We are all guilty of hypocrisy and promoting injustice, inequality and rejecting and judging others- the same offenses that Jesus gave himself over to correct; we are all in need of the forgiveness of Christ. We need Christ to touch us for we are all unworthy servants. We did not earn our

baptism, our right to feast on the precious body and blood of our Lord, the privilege to serve as leaders in Christ's Church. It is especially true that none of us can earn the right to serve as a minister of word and sacrament! Yet Christ makes us who are unworthy, worthy to receive and to serve. Now is a time when we must humbly serve each other and our God. If we are happy about the recent decisions of the church, we must reach out in love to those who are struggling. If we are lamenting, we need to fight against the urge of cutting off and allow ourselves to continue to be in relationship with others with whom we differ.

Bishop Hansen concluded his pastoral letter the following way...

*"We meet one another finally -- not in our agreements or our disagreements -- but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ."*

Brother's and sister's in Christ, there are times when we are called to trust and to let go of preconceived notions of right and wrong, good and evil, of what is beautiful and what is ugly, and even of what is benevolent and what is wicked. This is one of those times.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:7)

Amen