

September 2023



From the Bishop:

I went to the musical *1776* a few nights ago where I learned some new things about how the Declaration of Independence came to be written. As I watched, I felt proud to be an American – to be part of a group of people who wanted freedom from tyranny, freedom to vote, freedom from an empire far away.

There were also moments in this play when I was horrified at some decisions made. At the last minute, the clause to abolish slavery was removed so that all of the representatives would sign the document. The most powerful song in the musical, *Molasses to Rum*, reminds the audience how all the colonies were complicit in the selling of humans – not just the south. (<https://genius.com/John-cullum-molasses-to-rum-lyrics>)

As an American, I hold two realities. First, I rejoice in the wonder and aspiration of the United States of America. I am grateful for this country and I love what it is striving to be. At its best, it is a country where freedom and liberty are supreme. It is a place where care is given to those arriving on its shores. It is a place where people can freely go to church and other places of worship (or not go at all). In short, the United States is a promise of what can be.

At the same time, I hold the truth of this country's sins. Enslaved men built the White House, the U.S. Capitol building, and others. Homes of former presidents including George Washington's Mount Vernon and James Madison's Montpelier were built by men "owned" by them. The land that we in the Northwest Washington Synod are living on was once land that belonged to Samish and Duwamish, Lummi, and Muckleshoot and many others. Japanese people were unjustly imprisoned during World War II. Sundown laws and redlining laws were written throughout this country. As a white woman, I know that I could not vote until 1919. For women of color, the right to vote did not come until later. People who are part of the LGBTQIA+ communities have been harassed and discriminated against, beaten up and killed in this country. And discriminatory practices and violence continue to this day. In short, the systems in this country have violated and harmed people since its inception.

This is what it means to be an American: to vote, to engage in civic society, to appreciate this country, to grieve past and present sins, and to truthfully stand up and speak when it falls short of its ideals.

But what about those of us who are American and also Christian? Unequivocally it means that as much as one might love this country, this is not where our ultimate allegiance lies. For we are part of the body of Christ that extends beyond the borders of any country. As Lutheran Christians, we know that we are named, chosen, and called by God through Jesus. We hold deeply the joy that we are freed from sin, and, because of this, we are called into radical love, acceptance, and welcome – far beyond being a citizen of any country. We are freed to live beyond racism, injustice, and bigotry. Martin Luther wrote that freedom is a gift from God, not just for our sake, or our country's sake, but for the sake of the world.

Tragically, there are those who want to distort this freedom. To somehow merge Christian and American identities. Rather than freedom, conflating religious authority with political authority leads to tyranny and marginalization - especially of minority groups. Christian Nationalism is neither patriotic nor is it faithful. You do not have to be Christian to be a "true" American. And you do not have to be American to be Christian. At its heart, it is idolatrous. As the First Commandment states, "You shall have no other gods."

Together, as faithful Christians, let us live into Jesus' words – into radical love, acceptance and welcome. Let us speak truth to power and stand with those without power. Let us follow Jesus who commands us to love everyone as our brothers and sisters and siblings including our fellow citizens, those of other belief systems, and those of other nations. Together, as faithful Christians, let us stand up and speak out against Christian Nationalism and any system that marginalizes, harms, and subjugates another. As Jesus announces in the gospel of Luke, *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*

For freedom Christ has set us free. May we live and dance and revel in the freedom of Christ.

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee / bishop@lutheransnw.org



From the VEEP

“I know a few people who had their first experience with faux meat in the form of a badly prepared Impossible or Beyond burger in a restaurant. If you eat meat and you have an unappealing burger experience, do you give up burgers? Probably not, since you have numerous positive burger experiences as a counterpoint. But if you try a faux burger for the first time and the experience doesn’t go well, you have nothing else to compare it to, so ... game over.” (“The rise and fall of the faux-meat burger” Carrie Dennett, special to the Seattle Times Sunday July 2, 2023)

What, you may wonder, do reflections on the merits of faux meat burgers have to do with synod matters? Well, recently I served as the synod representative at a call meeting, a VP duty I truly enjoy. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of calling the candidate, but one of the dissenting voters felt compelled to explain to me the reasoning behind their vote. Apparently, this person had had a female pastor once before and had not found it to be a good experience, and therefore could not vote to call a female pastor ever again. I responded by telling them that we all have different experiences, and we can do no more than vote our consciences. In reality, however, I believe their attitude mirrors that of the faux-burger samplers. I expect that if they thought about it, they would realize they’ve had many male pastors and I would hope that some of them were excellent, but I imagine some of them were duds, too. It’s just that with a larger sample size, it is easier to recognize the diversity and not judge all male pastors based on one bad experience.

To that end, I think it is a good idea to occasionally have our world view expanded a bit. This summer, I was introduced to a BBC game show called “Only Connect.” The goal is to find connections between seemingly random clues. I’m usually pretty good at this sort of thing and thought I’d try playing along. Well, it turns out that my knowledge of cricket, snooker, and BBC radio presenters is sorely lacking. I hadn’t realized how truly America-centric my world view is until I tried this game. The more I watched, the more I saw how limited my world view is (though I did find myself yelling answers about American football – yes, the Ravens ARE a team - and the TV show MASH at the screen). Being reminded of my own limited cultural experience also helps me be more open minded about similar limitations in other people.

I suspect this is the case for most of us in many different areas of our lives. As the synod begins to work on auditing our policies and procedures with an eye to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, it is important to keep this lesson in mind. The broader our experience, or sample size, the more accurate will be our findings. Please keep synod leadership in your prayers as we embark on the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging work requested by the 2022 Synod Assembly.

Here's what the Synod Council and/or I have been up to in July and August:

- Synod Council did not meet in July.
- Synod Executive committee met on August 9, in large part to plan the agenda for the September meeting of the full council, which will take place at Lutherwood. The council will be participating in part of the Sacred Spaces retreat that weekend.
- Synod VP cohort: I attended planning meetings for upcoming VP events.
- Coaching: I have registered for the level 1 coaching training coming up in September.

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