

February 2025



From the Bishop:

Dear Beloveds,

One of my most vivid childhood memories is when my home congregation welcomed a Vietnamese family. As a young child, I remember helping prepare the home that the family would live in, going grocery shopping with my mom for food to fill the pantry, giving our couch to them, helping with the “world dinner” that would raise money for this endeavor, and, most of all, anticipating the arrival of these new people – Loung and Young and Quin. I remember when this little family stood in the back of the sanctuary and everyone stood and clapped and embraced this family.

As you might know, I grew up in a little town in eastern Washington. This town was conservative and mostly voted Republican (although my grandmother was mayor and she was a Democrat). I believe that my hometown church, St. Paul Lutheran Church, was also more conservative in nature. I am grateful for the values taught to me by my siblings in Christ there. The love and care that I received and learned formed who I am today. These people embraced the challenge and gift of welcoming a family from a different continent, a different religion, a different language, a different culture, a different country, and so much more to become part of our community. According to my parents, there was no partisan debate about accepting a Vietnamese family with open arms.

Today, when I listen to political rhetoric or podcasts or the news, I wonder when and why the topic of immigration has become so fraught. While I understand that there are complexities and nuances of immigration and I understand the need to make sure that there is control and order at the U.S. border, I don’t understand why there is the need to vilify the vast majority of immigrants who are, quite simply, desperate for safety, work, and good government.

I know the arguments: Yes, sometimes people come into this country through the wrong avenues. Yes, sometimes people stay without documentation. Yes, sometimes crime happens by people who are in this country illegally. Yes, sometimes resources are used for people who are not citizens. Yes, there are laws in this country and people should follow the laws.

But let me push back a little bit. There is overwhelming statistical analysis that show immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than U.S. citizens. We know through our own experiences that immigrants will work hard at whatever job they find – as I have been told by one Mexican immigrant, “Mexicans will do anything and we’ll work harder and longer than anyone else.” We know people who were brought to this country as children and know no other country. We know that there are some laws that are simply unjust made to target people who are already desperate – simply because of the color of their skin or their birth country.

As people of faith, we are called to reflect God’s vision towards a more just and reconciled world. As people of faith, we are called to follow Jesus’ example towards loving and caring for all people – especially those that have been marginalized. As people of faith, when we are grappling with hard things, we are called to turn to God and scripture for wisdom and knowledge. In view of welcoming the stranger from other lands, here are a few passages:

Genesis 23:4, Deuteronomy 10:19, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 27:19, 1 Chronicles 16:19-22, Job 29:15-17, Psalm 146:9, Jeremiah 7:5-7, Ezekiel 47:22, Zechariah 7:9-10, Matthew 5:43-44, Matthew 25:35, Matthew 25:40, Luke 10:27, Acts 10:34, Romans 12:13, Romans 13:8, Romans 13:10, Colossians 3:11, Hebrews 13:1-3, 3 John 1:5, Revelation 21:3, and there are many more not named.

These scriptures are about welcoming the foreigner, the outsider, embracing those who are in need, loving God by loving neighbor. If someone wants biblical authority, scripture makes it pretty clear. We are to welcome and embrace those who come from other places. We are to love our near and far neighbors as God loves us.

I am writing this article one week before the new administration begins. Truly, I am deeply concerned about the millions of people who will be affected and harmed by presidential action and legislative policies that have been promised by the incoming president.

I encourage you to learn more about how to support and welcome these new neighbors in need:

ELCA AAMPARO (<https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/ammparo>)

Faith Action Network (<https://fanwa.org/>)

Lutheran Community Services Northwest – Refugees Northwest (<https://lcsnw.org/program/refugees-northwest-2/>)

Global Refuge (<https://www.globalrefuge.org/blog/resources/congregational-resources/>)

Watch for more information from the Synod as we work and move and join together in loving God by loving the most vulnerable.

Please, I implore you, love and welcome and embrace your neighbor as God embraces each one of us.

+Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee | bishop@lutheransnw.org



From the VEEP:

Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.) - Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Don't believe everything you think - Armand Gamache, any of a number of novels by Louise Penny

As part of my new retirement routine, I have been reading *The Intellectual Devotional* by David S. Kidder and Noah D. Oppenheim. Each day there is a daily lesson from one of seven fields of

knowledge. A recent entry from the field of science was on cognitive dissonance. This is a theory that suggests we all hold a variety of beliefs, ideas, and thoughts that we want to be consistent. When those beliefs are contradicted, we experience cognitive dissonance. The conflicting cognition or behavior must change to bring the brain back to equilibrium. Because long held beliefs are harder to change, I think many of us reject any conflicting new ideas that throw us into a state of cognitive dissonance.

Back in the early 1980s, I took a course at PLU on Walt Whitman and the Language of the Psalms. It wasn't an explicitly religious class, focusing on the meter and rhythm of the language rather than the theological messages. However, one day we were reading a psalm that had some language that one student felt was "un-Christian." The professor reminded us that the Psalms predate the birth of Jesus, and therefore are not Christian. The student, quite indignantly, exclaimed, "Are you trying to tell me there were no Christians before Christ?!" I'm afraid some of us may have laughed, but the professor calmly explained that although he was sure there have always been people with qualities we now associate with Christianity, before Jesus they couldn't have been called Christians. The student left in a huff and I don't recall them returning. Confronted with information at odds with what they believed, they experienced cognitive dissonance and had to step away to regroup. I have no idea how or if they ever resolved their dilemma.

It is natural to want to protect our core beliefs. Cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable. We tend to build our sense of self and our understanding of the world around such deep beliefs. And yet, as followers of Jesus, we should be open to more flexible thinking. After all, Jesus is the king of creating cognitive dissonance. So much of what he taught was contrary to the prevailing beliefs of his time. The disciples had grown up hearing, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy," but Jesus told them instead, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Instead of blessing the rich and powerful, Jesus taught that the poor in spirit and meek were the blessed ones. He preached that the last will be first and first will be last and that those who wanted to save their lives would lose them and those who lost their lives for his sake would save them. It was all topsy-turvy - spawning cognitive dissonance. His closest friends spent a lot of time trying to reconcile what they'd been taught all their lives with what Jesus said and did.

I think we still struggle to integrate new and conflicting information into our world view. We believe what we think, even when our thoughts are ill founded or fleeting. We want to stick with how we've always done things and we fear change. This inflexibility of thought, this discomfort with cognitive dissonance ends up separating us from those who may see the world differently. I'm not exactly sure what that long ago student had a hard time reconciling. Maybe learning that God

has had other chosen people throughout history was the stumbling block. Maybe they couldn't reconcile the vengeful God of the Old Testament with the loving one they knew. Whatever it was, it ended up separating them from the rest of the class; it created a gap they couldn't bridge. In retrospect, I also wonder if, by laughing at their discomfort, we were expanding that gap and protecting ourselves from our own cognitive dissonance.

If you are interested in learning skills to embrace rather than reject differences - to build bridges rather than create gulfs, I commend to you the upcoming LiVE retreat, *Embracing Difference*. This event will help us recognize the inner tensions caused by the cognitive dissonance created as we navigate racial, political, and social differences. This is being held on Saturday, February 8 from 9am to 3pm at Our Saviors Lutheran Church in Everett. More information can be found here: <https://www.lutheransnw.org/events/embracing-difference/2025-02-08>

In the meantime, I will try to remind myself that, like Whitman, I can contain multitudes, and like the disciples I need to be open to the good news, even when it is at odds with what I already think I know. After all, if it wasn't new, it wouldn't be news.

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