

Embracing the Rainbow's Message

Genesis 9:8-17 and Luke 13:1-4 | Third Sunday After Pentecost | June 29, 2025 | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

It's strictly coincidental that the scripture from Genesis that was chosen back in the spring for a summer series just so happens to be on the week where a huge contingent in our community, as well as from Faith Lutheran, showed up at a school board meeting to argue against a policy that would have removed hate symbols from the dress code policy.

Many of the arguments, including the one that I made, countered a specific example raised that some people want to put the rainbow symbol in the same category as swastikas, the Confederate flag, and the KKK.

The justification from this school board member was that having the LGBTQ community adopt the symbol was threatening to their faith and it made this individual uncomfortable.

In my comments that I shared during the beginning of the school board meeting, I made the following theological statement:

As a religious symbol, a rainbow is a reminder of God's promise of love. As a Pride symbol, a rainbow has never been used as a threat to someone's life. Nobody ever saw a Pride rainbow and feared for their life or safety. A rainbow is a reminder that no matter who you are, you are a created and beloved child of God. Please don't make this decision as a defense of your religious and moral superiority. Reinstating hate symbols is not the world that God intended.

I was more nervous to give that statement than any sermon I can remember. And I think I know why. Speaking truth to power isn't easy.

I was so proud of the voices that spoke up that night, many of them from Faith Lutheran:

Like Jesse, a local business owner and father of three, who spoke out about the negative consequences that this decision had on how people perceive our town.

And Allison, who recently graduated from FLAS and remembered the hate that was present in the schools a few years ago. Her argument was that this removal of

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language would not help reduce the hate and fear we have in the school, it would make it worse.

Or Jen, who spoke on behalf of her daughters who are in the district and was asked to leave the meeting later after she continued to push back.

And Blake, our mayor who shared how this discussion couldn't keep him in his lane any longer. He felt compelled to speak up.

Faith Lutheran also has representation on the board. I'm extremely thankful for Jill, who is a fierce advocate for the safety and education of our students.

By the end of a really long night, the decision to remove the language was punted back to the policy committee. This struggle isn't over, but it also won't be forgotten.

Earlier in the week, one of my professors, Mary Hess shared a picture of her rainbow flag that had been destroyed, maliciously, in the middle of the night. There was footage on her ring camera of a person cutting it up, and then vandalizing other flags and businesses with rainbow materials in their windows.

It seems to me, the violence AGAINST the rainbow is more persistent than anything. It's why I felt compelled to speak to the school board to share a religious perspective that doesn't always get presented.

I knew that I was speaking to a group who had a much different interpretation of the rainbow than I do, but I was taught about the rainbow from a professor at Luther Seminary who was filled with wisdom.

Dr Terry Fretheim, who died in 2020, was able to effortlessly move a class through these old familiar stories and point out truths that were there the whole time, right under our noses.

The Noah narrative and the subsequent rainbow is no different.

Here's what Dr Fretheim had to say:

"The rainbow is a sign of divine good will toward the creation, even though God's judgment will continue.

At the same time God is not simply resigned to the world's evil. God must find a new way of dealing with the problem of sin and evil. God takes three complementary directions:

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1. God limits the ability to annihilate the world. God would be capable of doing it, but God cannot do it and be faithful to this promise given.
2. Divine judgment will be limited. Sin and consequence will continue, but no world-ending consequences will occur.
3. God is willing to endure the wickedness of the world and thus God's grief is ongoing.

The story of the rainbow is humanity's way of understanding God and whether or not God will intervene. Like in the story from Luke, when Jesus is asked whether some suffer more because they are worse sinners.

His answer, emphatically, is no.

Yet some would have us believe that the rainbow is a symbol that reminds us that God could become wrathful. Angry. Vengeful at any moment.

As Dr. Fretheim clearly demonstrates, the rainbow is a symbol of God's restraint. God sees how sinful and broken we are and promises to love us anyway.

It's the aftermath that we are left to clean up.

After the storm, we become neighbors who help clean up and rebuild.

After Mary's rainbow sign was destroyed, her neighborhood started putting out MORE rainbows in response, as reported on the news.

And after word that the school board was going to strike the language forbidding hate symbols, the community banded together. It was a show of solidarity and love.

Do you know why that language was explicitly added in the first place?

It wasn't because a sign was destroyed or a kid wore a shirt with a confederate flag on it.

In 1997, a young black man who was from Faith Lutheran was beaten up in the Junior High. The following day, a group of students wore white shirts in solidarity with the perpetrators, NOT the victim.

So, other students organized and began the deep and necessary work to talk about racism. One of those students is Laurie Hahn Ganser, daughter of Richard and Jeanette who were tragically killed last fall in a car accident.

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Laurie shared her letter to the school board with me.

I was one of the students who saw the assault in spring of 1997. I saw the boys in their white t-shirts the next day. As a response, our school brought together a group of students including myself, and we went classroom to classroom, facilitating discussions about the fight and larger issues of racism. Later that year, we were awarded the Minnesota Peace Prize for our efforts.

Laurie reflected that they went to the capital to receive their awards, but the young man who was beaten wasn't there. He received no recognition of what it took to be a black teen in an overwhelmingly white school.

No. That student and his family moved away. Students like Laurie and many of her peers decided they wouldn't return to Forest Lake after they graduated either.

That's why that policy was put into place. That's why this fight matters. That's why the rainbow is an appropriate metaphor as the rallying cry to respond.

It's because God promises not to intervene with divine punishment—but God still witnesses our actions. God still sees our hatred and vitriol. And God grieves that we do this to each other.

God puts it in our hands to find reconciliation and healing.

And sometimes, that means we have to do things that take us out of our comfort level to stand for what's right.

What's God up to next? There is unfinished business.

Yet we have a voice. Send a letter to the Forest Lake Times saying how you feel and what you want this community to represent.

Talk to neighbors about this. Be an ally to community members by withholding judgment and not acting out of fear.

The legacy of Forest Lake can be remembered for how the community rallied around this event. As the church, we have a truth given by God to boldly and proudly proclaim.

God promises to be with us. The rainbow is the most beautiful inclusive symbol that we have. We aren't letting anyone take that away from us. Amen.