

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Every year on the final Sunday of January is “Reconciling in Christ” Sunday or RIC Sunday for short. It’s a day when Lutheran congregations throughout the United States and Canada celebrate the affirmation and full inclusion of those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities along with their commitments to racial equity. As our staff prepared for today’s service, my phone kept buzzing with new information: presidential Executive Order terminates initiatives and positions related to “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” (or DEIA for short).<sup>1</sup> Executive Order suspends the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.<sup>2</sup> Executive Order establishes U.S. policy of two unchangeable sexes and removes the term “gender” and “gender ideology” from all policies and documents.<sup>3</sup> Executive Order orders the repeal of the Department of Education’s Title IX guidelines on transgender rights and protections for LGBTQIA+ persons.<sup>4</sup> Oh, how the echoes of oppression fill our government’s halls. And, what a week to celebrate RIC Sunday.

In today’s gospel reading, a different voice reverberated in the halls of the synagogue. This is Jesus’ first recorded public appearance in Luke’s gospel. Here Jesus’ mission and ministry are defined by the prophet Isaiah. We heard that God’s spirit sent Jesus to bring good news to the poor, release

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>

the captives, free the oppressed, and forgive of all debts (that's what "the year of the Lord's favor" means). And if connecting Jesus' ministry to the prophet Isaiah wasn't enough, Jesus's words reflected his mother's song. For Mary's mighty Magnificat shared the same message of liberation. And Mary's song was an echo of Hannah's prayer, that rippled like Judith's song, that resonated like Deborah's song, that resounded like Miriam's song, and that was a continuation of God's unending song – God's song of justice and liberation, God's song of welcome and wholeness, and God's song of love and peace.

And after Jesus' feet no longer touched the earth, the apostle Paul started to hum God's tune. That tune was in his head as he reminded the church in Corinth that we are made up of many different, diverse, and delightful individuals who need one another. Paul used the image of the body to explain how important diversity, interconnection, and unity are for the church and the world.

Yet, even in our denomination this very day we have enshrined discrimination in our social teachings. You see, the ELCA uses Social Statements as teaching and policy documents for the denomination. They cover topics like sexism, racism, the death penalty, abortion, criminal justice, and care for creation.<sup>5</sup> Back in 2009, the church adopted a Social Statement on Human Sexuality. That Social Statement utilized a theological concept called "bound conscious," which was once used by Martin Luther on a different topic. The theological idea is that each person in the ELCA should

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements>

respect the other's bound conscience in regard to the acceptance of "same-gender sexual behavior." Four positions are explained ranging from rejecting these relationships as sinful on one end to affirming and celebrating these relationships and allowing for marriage on the other. In 2022, at the last churchwide assembly, which is the highest legislative body in the ELCA, voted by an 88% super-majority to authorize a possible revision of the social statement that reconsiders these four positions of bound conscience. So, the church created a task force (as we love to do) to work on reviewing this position. They are at the juncture where they are receiving comments and feedback from the ELCA on their draft statement before making a recommendation to the churchwide assembly this summer. As a gay pastor in the ELCA, I have seen how these four positions of "bound conscience" have been used to justify the rejection of queer people's personhood in our denomination. It has resulted in good, faithful queer people leaving positions of leadership. It has resulted in God's children being discriminated against and abused.

And this reminds me of today's first reading from Nehemiah where the Israelites grieve their history, their exile, and the destruction of the temple. So too, we could grieve the past, get angry, or I, as one of the votes that approved that statement on Human Sexuality in 2009, could tell you why those of us organizing for queer equality in the ELCA voted as we did. Yet, I'm struck by Ezra explaining to the Israelites not to grieve what was but rather, focus on the joy of the Lord as their strength. Look forward to God's joy being made know. For the joy of the Lord is in love. The joy of the Lord is found in diversity and inclusion. The joy of Lord is with the margins and

supports the downtrodden. The joy of the Lord is found in working for racial and gender justice. The joy of the Lord is what we can reflect into our world. So, on this RIC Sunday, I invite you to join me in responding to the task force's survey, which closes THIS Friday. I invite you to read how they have, unfortunately, suggested *keeping* the bound conscious positions. And then, I invite you to share our values as an RIC congregation. I invite you to share your thoughts about the harm of continuing to hold up a policy of discrimination. I invite you to use your voice to share the ways our Christian faith is at odds with the concept of bound conscious. The insert in your bulletin invites you to consider reviewing the draft proposal and submitting a response. If you're in person, we've also made it a bit easier to submit a response by completing the demographic information on the back of the form and placing it in the offering plate or the labeled basket in the fellowship hall so we can submit the form on your behalf. If you're online, you can use the document to paste the suggested responses into the form as a starting place. I know for some of you it feels like our values and what we've worked for is eroding before our very eyes. Yet, what remains true is that our work has never been done, because God's work is not complete. We will continue to affirm and welcome people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. We will continue to work toward a more anti-racist congregation and community. We will write, speak, and study so that together we can sing God's song.

Friends, today it is my deepest joy to celebrate with you 19 years of being a Reconciling in Christ congregation! May we listen to the words of Ezra calling us to focus on the joy of the Lord. Might we learn from Paul's image of the body of Christ so that we can include, empower, and support all people,

especially those on the margins. And, most importantly, may we allow Jesus' voice to echo in our ears, our hearts, and become our all. For, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." May we remember that we are anointed with that same spirit. Amen.