Our second reading comes from Matthew, from the risen Christ, summarizing what we are to make of the story of the life of Jesus. In Matthew 28 we read, “Go then unto all of the nations on earth and baptize them all in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to follow in my way, and lo, I will be with you in Spirit even unto the close of this age.”

I saw this meme on social media this month, talking about what is wrong with Evangelical Christian faith that routinely gets hyped by the media. It said this. “One of the most successful deceptions of our time was convincing many American Christians to fear diversity more than racism, equality more than misogyny, democracy more than fascism, immigrants more than authoritarians, the poor more than corrupt billionaires, and empathy more than cruelty.”

That last line comes right out of a few sermons that I've read on why we need to support ICE in cleansing our streets of illegal immigrants. Too much empathy for strangers, they argue, is potentially dangerous. We could inadvertently welcome our own destruction by being kind to people who intend to destroy us.

I never know who these people are that intend to destroy us, the guys wiping down our cars at the car wash? The day laborers repairing the steps to the church? I don't know, but we've heard this line at least since September 11th, like there are some really dangerous people sprinkled in amongst all of the poor people that come here for humanitarian reasons and we just can't be too sure.

And it is strange to hear people who follow Jesus say that too much empathy, too much compassion, could become a bad thing. They say this because they think we live in the "End Time". We do not live in the End Times, to be clear. Evangelicals teach that the

world goes to hell during the “End Time” and only a righteous remnant of “true Christians”- most of us gathered here are not ‘true Christians, ' I’m sorry to tell you- only true Christians will be rescued from the vengeful judgment that Christ will bring when he returns to save us. When they preach these sermons, they live out of their anger, not their love, driven by a literal reading of Revelation rather than the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, which you hear at Christ Church week in and week out. What you get from these Evangelical Christians are people who claim to be the most religious; they don’t actually follow Jesus directly in the way portrayed in the Gospels, which is strange from the outside.

But if you zoom out a bit and don’t view the Bible as a book that must be read literally. If you view it more as a repository of our spiritual heritage, as we do at Christ Church, you get an

expanding vision of God, not a contracting vision focused on a few elect, righteous people (at the end).

The Bible is actually two things at once. It is a collection of our hopes and dreams spiritually- our ideals. And it is also a record of how the people of God have behaved in the past. So we have hopes of inclusion, but also many examples of discrimination and bigotry in life. But the moral message is the point, so the vision of inclusion transcends us and points us towards God's way.

There is actually a brilliant book you will never read on this exact subject, written by a French intellectual who is atheist and Jewish. It caused quite a stir among Jews in Israel, with vocal criticism from the West Bank Settler types that want to claim the whole region for Jews. Jean Daniel wrote a book called "The Jewish Prison", where he uses the scriptural tradition itself to show why Israel will never be a regular nation like other nations.

Daniel says that when God “elects” the Jews, when God chooses them in their suffering during slavery and promises to deliver them, this election was never understood as a privilege that set them apart as special, entitled to something other people weren’t entitled to, like a strip of land in Palestine.

Daniel says that the spiritual promise of a homeland is surrounded by the actual experience of the Jews who have almost always been in diaspora, scattered among all the nations, never having possessed the Promised Land. That is why we have so many references, like in Isaiah, that the Jews are called to be a ‘light unto the nations.’ Jews are called to be a moral witness in the countries in which they actually live in exile. They aren’t given a special privilege. They are given a special ‘responsibility’ to call all the nations that they actually live in to a moral accounting of the way that they live so that they consider the needs of the “poor

and the oppressed" like God considered the "poor and the oppressed" when God saw the suffering of the Jews in slavery in Egypt.

His book got him into a lot of trouble with the Netanyahu/Settler crowd in Israel because he argued that Israel will never be like 'the other nations' because that is not their calling. Their calling is to elevate the moral discourse of every nation until all the nations of the world stream towards Jerusalem voluntarily because they get the moral vision that God hopes for the whole world.

So you get this dynamic in the biblical witness that is progressively inclusive. Like what? Well, in the Exodus story, when God gives the Israelites a Promised Land, the people that lived in the land, called Moabites, are bad. Israel will not live among them in Deuteronomy 23, pretty clear. But then you get this

whole book about a woman named Ruth, who is the epitome of faith and integrity, and she is???? A Moabite.

Like? There is a line in Jeremiah 25 that says that the people of Uz are evil. But then, we get another whole book about a guy who is from Uz, who is ‘the most blameless man on earth '. His name is Job, and he is from???? Uz.

Jesus expands this juxtaposition. He tells a story about Samaritans, who were reviled for being ‘half-breeds’ by Jews. And in Jesus' teaching, the Samaritan is not excluded, but included in God’s care. As Bixby Knolls has noted. In the bible, “The story may begin with prejudice, discrimination and animosity, but the Spirit moves God’s people towards openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance and affirmation.”[i]

Jesus just expands our moral vision. He reaches out to lepers, to prostitutes, to women who were stigmatized in his day. He

includes the insane, eats with beggars, welcomes children, and tells people who couldn't keep kosher that they were worthy. He includes Gentiles, non-Jews, like the Roman centurions who guarded him to death.

The earliest Christians followed that example, like in the Book of Acts. In Jewish tradition, the religiously orthodox were told in Deuteronomy 23 to stay away from Eunuchs because they weren't really male or female. But this Eunuch wants to know about the way of Jesus, so Phillip makes him a disciple. So we pray for our transgender kids and go out of our way to make sure that they know they are children of God just like they are.

You have the way that we are, the prejudice that we routinely demonstrate, and you have the higher way of God, exhibited by he example of Jesus. At the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, we get the direction that all Christians should follow as 'disciples of

Jesus' in the Gospel of Matthew. In his parting speech to the disciples after the resurrection, Jesus says, "Go ye, therefore, unto all the nations". The message of God ultimately includes all people. We are called to see the whole world as children of God, to find a place for them at the table, to treat them with respect and compassion. All the nations of the world.

And that is what we do on our best days. I think of Jose Hernandez[ii], the American astronaut. Jose grew up like many of our Mexican-American immigrants, the child of farm workers who were forced to move frequently for work. One of his elementary school teachers, Miss Young, recognized that Jose was a great student. She went to his home, talked to his parents, told them how talented their son was, and asked them to stay in one place so that Jose could get a serious education rather than move around. It cost them, but they sacrificed for their child, like so many of us.

Jose grew up, became fascinated with space exploration, and learned about Franklin Chang-Díaz, another astronaut. Jose said to himself, “Look, someone like me is in space and he thought to himself, “I can do this,” so he applied to NASA. He was rejected. He applied again and was rejected, and again, and again and was rejected. 11 times he was rejected. But the 12th time, he was accepted. In 2009, he flew aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery.

He grew up picking strawberries and lived to look down on those fields from the outer orbit of Earth. And here is why that matters. Jose didn’t just say, “I made it.” He didn’t think of himself as “special” in a way that others were not. No, he gave back. He developed the “Reaching for the Stars” Foundation to encourage disadvantaged kids like himself to study math, engineering, science, and technology, so they could realize their potential as well.

Someone opened the door for him. Someone widened the playing field, so that he was included. So, he widened it for someone else. He invited more people to realize their potential, like God inviting us all to a wedding feast, because we all have a place at God's party. That is because God says to you and you and you. "We have room for your gifts here." "Your background does not disqualify you." "Our community values what you have to offer."

Doesn't matter what nation you are from. Doesn't matter if you are straight, gay, or transgender. Doesn't matter if you are male or female; we celebrate and respect your unique giftedness because God celebrates you as a child of God. That is what we do on our best days. It is the divine way.

The message is as old as the Bible itself. God comes to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12, at the very beginning of the

bible story, and says, “I will bless you… so that you will be a blessing” to others. When you get through the door, make sure to hold that door open for someone coming after you.” That is the spiritual point of our lives. We are invited to become part of a “Conspiracy of Goodness” that God intends for us. Blessed, grateful, compassionate, living out of our higher selves.

And may you be blessed with the responsibility to see others as God does. May you actualize your higher self. May you see the diversity around you and weave a harmony that realizes more potential in the group than you imagined possible. May you know the deeper gratitude of the spiritual life and live abundantly as Jesus puts it in the Gospel of John.

For you are more beautiful than you know, more powerful and impactful on the lives of those around you than you realize. And you can turn one part of your world upside down when you realize

what has been inside of you all along. Faith, hope, and love, my siblings. God's hands are on your life, quite in spite of you.

This week, the last word comes from the Church sign in front of Glendale United Methodist Church in Nashville. It reads, "I will always love you." Signed God and Dolly. Amen.

Our first reading speaks to the culmination of God's hope for the world. It looks forward to a day when all the nations of the world will come together seeking to be filled with God's Spirit. I read from Isaiah 2. 2-4. n the last days

the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

3 Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

[i] From a meme on Facebook
[ii] This example was provided to me by ChatGPT