

“My Way” Sermon on Sunday, March 20, 2022

Dear church,

One of the most famous American songs of the last century, at least as far as I am concerned, is Frank Sinatra’s iconic “My Way.” We’ve all heard it, we have heard the entertainer croon those words and they fit in so perfectly with American culture and values. We are a people where “my way” counts, where taking risks and personal chances is encouraged, where individuals can flourish. I almost think this song could not have been written in any other country but the United States. It fits the mold, and those of us who were lucky enough to participate in the 2019 Mission trip to Puerto Rico will remember the Karaoke performance of Mr. Bernie Heinze, taking his cues from good old Frank, belting this song out into the humid air with wild abandon. Trust me, those of us who were there will not forget it.

I have a fondness for this song myself, it’s a classic. Yet, I also know that “having it my way” can easily be overdone and conflict with the values that our Scriptures teach us from Genesis to Revelation, from Isaiah to Jesus. I want to speak today about Isaiah who has a very different take on “my way.” The prophet is known for his wonderful poetic style and his comforting, encouraging messages in the latter part of the book. In the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman, Isaiah has a knack for hopeful imagination. Speaking tenderly to the people in Exile about their spiritual roots, he uses many beautiful metaphors, from flowers blooming in the desert to a highway being built that leads back to Jerusalem, to this very interesting notion of God’s provision for his people, especially the poor among them: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” What grace means to us as Lutherans, it can be found here in the Hebrew Scriptures, long before Jesus appeared. It’s a gift from God.

And yet, the most powerful statement of this chapter comes toward the end of today’s lesson when Isaiah relays this message from the God of Israel: “My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts... As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” What is happening here? Is God putting them in their place? And with them, is God putting good old Frank Sinatra and American individualism in our place? There is an element of that, you can’t deny it. But it’s not entirely what you might think. Usually when somebody is putting us in our place, it’s a humiliation or at least embarrassing. You took a train and sat down in 1st class and the conductor kicks you out because you only purchased a ticket for second class. You spoke about a sensitive issue and the involved party tells you, “None of your business!” Something Like that. It’s not a nice feeling. We might think that God is putting the Israelites in their place here because they are a little bit in over their heads. But if we think that, we are totally on the wrong track. That’s not what God is trying to communicate. Rather the exact opposite...

“Think bigger,” God says to the members of the exile community in Babylon. “You might feel that arranging yourself in your life where you are now and keeping a few old traditions as long as possible is all you can ask for...” And God says, “No way, that is not my way, it is way too small, I will show you something better. I will lead you out of your exile back to Jerusalem. I will restore you as a people. There is a future for you as bright as it was when I spoke to your ancestor Abram all those years ago. But you have to believe in my way. You have to trust me all over again.

So, I want to ask myself and ask you: how often do we think too small of God because we are stuck in our own limitations; we can’t picture what God may have in mind for us; we feel that we should stay put and be humble and accept our lot, and God says, “Yes, be humble... and abandon your small mindedness. That’s what it means to be humble. Embrace my vision for you, my way...” I want to ask our church, and not just St. Peter’s but the church at large: how often are we stuck in our ELCA ways of doing things because that’s how we do things and our ways of thinking, often small-minded, timid thinking, with no concept of the splendor of the creator God who has made us, all of us... No, God is not putting us down in our place in this passage. God is putting us up in our place, up, next to the divine master and his or her thoughts and his or her ways, because having it

our way simply doesn't cut it. It leads to the opposite of freedom and the opposite of hope and the opposite of God's kingdom... What if we could sing this at the end of our life?

*And now the end is near
So I face the final curtain
My friends, I'll say it clear
And state my case of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full
I've traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this
I did it God's way.*

Amen.