

November 13, 2016
Pastor Michael D. Costello

In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is a very special day in the life of Grace Lutheran Church and School. But it is also a very special day for me and I am honored, Pastor Lauren and Pastor Dave, that you asked me to preach.

I first met Pastor Dave Wegner when he was a soprano in the Lenoir-Rhyne Youth Chorus in Hickory, North Carolina, where I went to college. He reminded me of this at a cookout in 2005 when he arrived at Southern Seminary. I took note of Dave because of our common connection to Hickory; but, mostly, because he had a really nice singing voice.

After I graduated from seminary in 2006 I was invited to serve on the adjunct faculty in worship and music. Part of my work there was to direct the seminary choir. You may not know this about pastors, but not all of them sing well. But the seminary choir in the fall of 2006 was different. It was a pretty great group of musicians, and this is where I first met Pastor Lauren Wegner in her first year of seminary. Not only does she have the best voice for chanting known to humanity, but she plays the guitar, flute, and loves to improvise. We had some great jam sessions that year.

I'm not the only one who met Lauren in that choir. It was about three weeks into the semester that I secretly predicted that Dave and Lauren would soon be dating. Well, that seemed to work out okay!

I was devastated that I could not play for their wedding in 2008. But the reason I couldn't is because I was moving to River Forest to serve as Cantor here at Grace.

Eight years later, when I was asked if I knew of anyone who might be worth interviewing for the position of associate pastor, I have to admit that out of all my colleagues, friends, classmates, and former students, very few names came to mind. After all, I would have to work with these people every day and, worse, they would have to work with me.

Pastors Lauren and Dave not only have a deep love for the church, its worship life and musical heritage; but, more importantly, they are just good pastors. They know that their call here is to proclaim the Word of God made incarnate in the person of Jesus and to celebrate the sacraments, where we are cleansed from sin and receive God's abundant and ever-flowing grace.

And this, after all, is what each of us needs. No matter how long we have attended Grace Church, no matter our age, our socio-economic status, the number of degrees we hold, our political affiliations, our race, gender, or any other marker, we all stand before almighty God in need grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sin.

We all have some idea in our minds about what it is that these two new pastors should be doing with their time—which projects should get their attention, how they are to do their work, with whom they are to spend the most time, and on and on it goes. But what we need? Well, that is an entirely different matter. What we need is for these pastors to proclaim that Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried for us and for our salvation. After all, this and not anything else is the Gospel that saves us. Everything else that we do together in ministry is grounded in that reality.

Baptized into his death we die to sin and rise with him in glory. Because of his saving love on the cross, we cling to the promise of life without end in which we too stand before the throne of God, giving unceasing worship to the Lamb.

But what happens between now and then? That is the subject of today's lectionary readings.

The first reading from Malachi brings a word of judgment, warning that the day is coming when the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble, burning to the point that there will be neither root nor branch. Perhaps in this age of uncertainty, this is a reminder to us that we need to hear the proclamation of God's Law. But in Malachi there is also Gospel: "But for you who revere my name," we hear, "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." Indeed, Jesus is that Sun who rises in splendor to bring healing to the nations. And what nation, including our own, doesn't need that?

The second reading from 2 Thessalonians urges members of the early church not to live in idleness, like mere busybodies that accomplish nothing. What a superb admonition to pastors beginning their ministry in a new call and to all of us. Here we find a reminder that we rely on the Holy Spirit, who urges us through the Word of Christ to do our work quietly and to not grow weary in doing what is right.

But this is easier said than done. In our fallen state of sin we become distracted and too often take our eye off the ball.

In the Gospel reading from St. Luke we hear Jesus speaking of those things that will happen before the Last Day. Personally, I need not read past the first two verses of the reading to feel convicted. They read: "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, [Jesus] said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'"

As one who spends his entire week making sure that what happens in this room looks and sounds as good as possible, perhaps this is a reminder to me and to all of us that we are called to keep the main thing the main thing. And that main thing has a name: Jesus.

He continues to warn his disciples not to be led astray by those who claim to come in his name and say, "I am he" and, "the time is near!" He encourages those who hear of wars and insurrections, "Do not be terrified." He warns that, indeed, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom . . . But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name." No, Pastor Dave and Pastor Lauren, Jesus isn't describing the life of a pastor at Grace.

Jesus is encouraging his disciples, you and me, to keep our eyes fixed on him, for he is the one who gives the gifts of grace that sustain us. Jesus says that he will give us words and a wisdom that none of our opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. And when Jesus speaks of providing words and wisdom, he is speaking about himself. For he is the Word spoken by the very breath of God, that same Word that brought creation into being. And, in the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians: "To those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.

It is precisely because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that the promise of today's Gospel reading is true: Not a hair of our heads will perish. Even when we are being betrayed, or even should we be put to death, we endure with him and gain our souls. And we do so because of what he endured on our behalf.

In the words of Hebrews 12:2, Jesus is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews continues with a good word for all of us as the people of God and for our new pastors as they begin their ministry among us: “Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”

Pastor Lauren, Pastor Dave, and each one of you in the Grace Lutheran Church and School community:

In the years to come, let us not become distracted in our ministry together. As we eagerly await Christ’s return, let us consider, above all else, the love of God made perfect in Jesus, his saving death, and his glorious resurrection. And then, with grateful hearts, let us heed well the words of the Psalmist:

Sing to the LORD a new song;
For he has done marvelous things.

Amen.