

Sermon – David R. Lyle
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
3 Epiphany – Year A
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“Remain in Light”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. On Wednesday morning, our students arrived for chapel unprepared. They had not been alerted to the dramatic shift in our sanctuary’s appearance. As they noticed the absence of the deep-red dossal curtain, they began to chatter amongst themselves, wondering what this change might mean. A teacher walked past, chuckling, and said, “They seem to be struggling with change.” So, during my homily, I told them that it had been taken out for cleaning and would be back in a few weeks. But I also asked them what they thought about it. One boy raised his hand and said, “I’m glad it’s coming back! When I saw it was gone, I just wanted to cry.” Another hand shot up; the girl to whom it belonged said, “Well, you got my hopes up. I never liked it anyway.” And then another hand, and with it, a question: “Why didn’t you have it cleaned while we were on Christmas break?” Within a few moments, the temporary removal of the dossal curtain had elicited a difficulty with change, diametrically opposed opinions, and a complaint about process. I beamed with pride. We’ve made them into Lutherans!
2. Disagreement in the church is nothing new, of course. Years ago, when I was just starting out, a wise mentor said to me, “When churches run out of real things to disagree about, they’ll turn on each other about the color of the carpet.” Fortunately, I’ve never really found that to be true; or maybe I’ve just always served among people with more important things about which to

disagree. Nevertheless, this is nothing new. After his buttering-up of a salutation to the Corinthians, which we heard last week, Paul begins his broadside against his readers. In a letter that will deal with sins ranging from sexual immorality to the abuse of the Lord's Supper, he begins by disagreeing with their disagreement. How can you, he asks, you who belong to Christ, go around boasting about belonging to Cephas or Apollos or even me, Paul? Are you kidding? Are you fools? Or will you come to your senses and remember that you worship Jesus Christ who was crucified? For it is the crucified Christ alone who is the Lord of the church. And this same Christ, who converted Saul to Paul, who died and was raised for those squabblers in Corinth, who stands before the church today. It is this Jesus who calls to us.

3. Jesus calls to us in the midst of deep division, in both church and world, and it's not about curtains or carpet. There are those in our nation who espouse Christian nationalism, who seek to use Jesus to prop up their vision of a world where might makes right. The connection is clear in a recent recruiting video in which ICE makes use of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – blessed are the peacemakers, it tells us, as we watch footage of glorified violence. In the broken world in which we live, some level of immigration laws are needed. But the current methods of enforcement are cruelty and violence. Yesterday, in Minnesota, Alex Pretti was killed in cold blood by ICE agents. Although the government is doubling down by telling us not to believe the evidence of our own eyes, all the video footage released so far tells a clear story: Alex Pretti was shot multiple times without good reason. Blessed are the peacemakers? The division in the broader church is not an honest difference of opinion; it is a reminder that there are contrasting visions of the gospel and that some of them are wrong. And I know nothing in scripture that tells me that the Jesus we worship is likely to be on the side of a heavily-armed paramilitary force operating against a civilian population.

4. Where do we go from here? Things are never as hopeless as they seem. Isaiah, writing in a time of violent upheaval, reminds the people of God's decisive victory on the day of Midian. What is the day of Midian? I'm so glad you asked! During the time of the Judges, Gideon's force faced overwhelming odds against the Midianite army. But instead of reinforcing Gideon's army, God reduces it. Left with only 300 men, Gideon sends them against their enemy with torches, trumpets, and clay jars. With light and crashing sound, they terrify the Midianites, who turn in terror upon each other, engulfed and defeated by their own violence. As God acted in the past, Isaiah promises, so will God act in the future. But the force of 300 is reduced further. Now only One comes forth, and he brings nothing to the fight except grace and mercy, forgiveness and love, and a nonviolent willingness to lay down his life for his enemies. Jesus will go to the cross and to his death. In taking his life, the forces of sin and hate and violence and evil and death will devour themselves. Such forces cannot give life, and will always lead to their own end, whatever damage they create along the way. We worship the God of Gideon, and we do so by following the ways of Jesus. His cross may look foolish to this world's powers, but we know it is our salvation.

5. This Jesus stands before us, fresh off his victory over Satan in the wilderness. His first word? Repent! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Turn, peoples and nations, from your wanton ways and seek now the ways of peace – not a cheap peace that goes along to get along but the real peace of God in which life can flourish for all. To follow Jesus will cost us everything, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew well. Living under the Nazi regime, in 1937 he wrote, "When Christ calls a [person], he bids [them] come and die." In Christ, we meet our end. But we also meet our beginning, the new life that comes only from Jesus. Where once we were entangled in the nets of sin and violence, now we are caught up in the reign of peace and love. Caught up in peace and love – not wishy-washy emotions but powerful forces that can and will one day have the last word over sin and death.

6. What does this discipleship look like? For Andrew and Peter, James and John, it looked like dropping everything, trading one set of nets for another. For 100 or so clergy in Minnesota on Friday, it looked like putting their bodies on the line while publicly praying, being willing to be arrested as peaceful witnesses against ICE and state-sanctioned violence. What will it look like for us in these days? I don't know that we fully know yet. I pray we will be faithful. I know Christ will be faithful to us, and to all who take up the witness of his cross. For this is the gospel: When the people sit in darkness, in the region and shadow of death, the great light of Christ will shine forth all the brighter. However long seems the night, dawn is coming. Christ who was dead is alive. Your sins are forgiven and you are alive. Live now in freedom and light. Never mind the dorsal curtain; the temple curtain is torn, and nothing can stop the light shining through. Jesus is calling. Will you follow him? On my own, I'm not always so sure. But I'm not on my own, and neither are you. Together, Christ, we follow you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.