



Zion Lutheran Church

11 Schooleys Mountain Road
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Dear Kin in Christ at Zion,

This letter is overdue. I wish to share my perspective and also tools from the Lutheran Christian tradition in order to offer help with understanding the current moment, particularly in terms of the killing of George Floyd and ensuing protests. I am not sharing my own thoughts in order to tell you how to think, but because I'd like to be open with you about my thoughts.

First, two reasons I was drawn to the Lutheran tradition was its unflinching confession that all human beings are sinful, and that when it comes to our relationship with God, all that humans can stand on – or cling to – is God's grace. Or as my pastor, Pastor Franklin D. Fry, cleverly put it: "Lutherans are the AA of the church catholic¹ - at the heart of our confession of faith are ambiguity and absolution"; and also, "The only absolute in this life is the Absolution".² As for ambiguity, there is very little in this world that humans can easily discern as absolutely right or wrong. One example is the 5th commandment "you shall not kill" which at first seems easily discernable; however, given the circumstance, we innately understand that there are times when killing is regrettable but the lesser of two evils, such as when serving in the military, police, or to protect another person or the self from death. Understanding life in terms of ambiguity, and our relationship to God is terms of grace and not deeds is the way that Lutherans frame all social statements.³

I'm still new to Zion, but even so, I sense that parishioners find themselves across the spectrum – from quite liberal to quite conservative. For example, I know that there are some among us who are eager participants in events sponsored by Black Lives Matter (BLM), and others who are grieved that we invited participation for a BLM protest on the church campus. There are some among us who are grieved over institutionalized racism and others who aren't convinced that it exists.

I'll start with my own confession: I fear I missed the opportunity right after George Floyd's death – being caught up in the pandemic and reopening Zion – to condemn that action as police brutality and to stand with Black people and their allies in outrage and lament. Ever since I took a 4-day anti-racism workshop in Chicago about 20 years ago, my eyes were opened to see race

¹ The word *katholikos* is Greek for universal, so the church catholic means the church universal.

² God's absolute forgiveness of sin revealed by the cross and resurrection and declared at the beginning of worship each Sunday, "*I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sin, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*"

³ Social statements are considered to be teaching documents in the ELCA, and not hierarchical pronouncements.

in our country in ways I had never before perceived. I think that institutionalized racism is part of our society and that I benefit from unasked-for & unrecognized privileges as a white person.

Why have you not heard me speak about this? First, I'm new, still building trust, and in addition to my main role, I see my role among you as attempting to encourage healing and building bridges after conflicts in the past decade. Mainly, though, I understand that a Lutheran pastor's primary role is to proclaim the gospel (via Word & Sacrament) and not to instruct, convince or inspire people to act in moral or ethical ways. Rather, I am to preach the gospel so that you once again fall in love with God – trust God, have faith in God – and then naturally respond with love toward the neighbor in your daily callings. It's not that Lutherans see faith as separate from our callings in the world; rather, faith drives us deeper into the world to serve and love the neighbor.⁴ For Lutherans, the concern is always that the gospel be unencumbered so that God's unconditional forgiveness is not connected to our behavior. Otherwise, people might begin to think that their relationship to God is based on what they do – instead of being wholly based on God's mercy.

Lutherans also try to avoid confusing how God works in this world with how God works in the new world (i.e., the two kingdoms). When these get confused, the result is either that Christians try to run the world, or that the world tries to run the gospel – and either way means that the gospel is lost because it becomes law. The purpose of the gospel is not to make society good or moral, it's to make sinful people new. The new creation in us needs no laws or examples, but of course, the sinner also lurks in each Christian until the day we die which is why we *do* need them. Christians also believe that this world will be broken until the “last day” even with all of our good efforts to change it. But the new creation - raised up by God through the Word – is not discouraged because what we do now (in this moment) can make a difference to our neighbor (in this moment). And the new creation in us fervently wishes to protect, uphold and serve the neighbor, so that we continually discern who needs our help, asking “what's in me for you?” (rather than the sinner's question “what's in it for me?”).

This doesn't mean that Christians are not informed by faith or the scriptures for decisions about our life in our society and trying to discern God's intentions for it. But it's less clear and specific than we might wish. Christians have Paul's clear exhortation to be subject to governing authorities, that God has authority over all governing authorities, and that those authorities are to be servants of God, for doing good⁵. From Genesis we hear that humans were created in God's image. There were laws given to the ancient Jewish people and from them we can surmise what might be God's intentions: In general, that human beings are precious, all of creation is precious, and life is precious. But even so, life is ambiguous, and the particulars are discerned by each human and each age. As believers, we discern the particulars with guidance from God and trust in God.

⁴ One of the prayers from our hymnal for after Communion: *“We give you thanks, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through the healing power of this gift of life. In your mercy, strengthen us through this gift, in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another...”*

⁵ See Romans 13

All that being said, the police officer's brutal action against George Floyd was obviously not what the Apostle Paul had in mind for authorities! Many police officers were also shocked by the video, and in one parishioner's words, "In my 15 years of experience with 3 different police departments I have never observed behavior like what occurred in Minnesota."

This is where the Lutheran tool of "both/and" is so helpful. As NJ Bishop, Tracie Bartholomew wrote, *"Similarly, reactions in the aftermath of Mr. Floyd's death have given rise to false dichotomies – either you work toward eradicating racism or you support law enforcement personnel; either you support the protests or you denounce vandalism and destruction. As Lutheran Christians, we live in the tension of an "either/or" world with a "both/and" response all the time. We are both saint and sinner at the same time. We need both law and gospel in our proclamation. So it is that we can work toward eradicating racism and support the vocation of police officers. We can support protests for justice and denounce the destruction of local businesses.*

I should say that I do not find the analogy of "a few bad apples" among police to be a compelling explanation as it minimizes an experience that African-Americans have lamented since at least 1865, and avoids the task of critically analyzing problems of the current system – even with all of its complexities. It would be the same as saying in 1985 "Well, there are just 'a few bad apples' among priests who have hurt children"⁶ without looking into the system that allowed it to exist and covered it up.

Likewise, I do not think that "All Lives Matter" is a helpful rejoinder, as it dilutes the specific issue – that to some, including Mr. Chauvin and the official process that allowed him to continue in his role after 18 complaints – the lives of people of color don't seem to be as valuable as the lives of police officers. Of course blue lives matter! Of course all lives matter! I hear the phrase "Black lives matter" not as "Black lives matter more;" but rather that "Black lives matter, *too*" ... and at long last.

Finally, although I do understand there to be systemic issues of racism across institutions in our country, I do not think it is accurate nor helpful to paint with one brush all 18,000 police departments, its officers, or even every act of police force. Similarly, it's not accurate nor helpful to paint all protests against racism as anti-police or anti-American. Because Lutherans understand that all human beings and the institutions they embody are infected with sin - all police officers & departments cannot be assumed to deserve uncritical allegiance, just as all protesters or protests against racism cannot be assumed to deserve uncritical support.⁷

⁶ My intention is not to point an accusing finger at the Roman Catholic church as there have been abuses of power in all institutional churches as they are run by sinful human beings; this is merely an example from recent memory.

⁷ Unlike many of my colleagues, I've always had one hesitation with participating in Black Lives Matter events – that it allowed for the use of force against force. I think the Christian witness, centered on the cross, is that of loving the enemy and offering peace and mercy in the face of hate and force. Currently, in my opinion, Black Lives Matter has such a huge following, that there doesn't seem to be one interpretation of its purpose or principles and many people support it in order to stand in solidarity with Black people in the face of injustice.

I find it comforting to remember - going back 2000 years - there has never been a Christian congregation that has agreed completely on social or even religious issues! We have Apostle Paul's witness to this in that many of his letters, written to the earliest Christian congregations, addressed *conflicts*. When a congregation thinks of itself as wholly conservative or liberal, I fear that the pastor and parishioners are fooling themselves and that there are parishioners who simply do not feel comfortable to vocalize their witness. We need to hear each other's witness, grounding ourselves in the love of God revealed in the crucified and risen Christ, and not simply in an ideology, or a long-held or cherished perspective – which we humans can find ourselves so easily worshipping before God.

These are difficult times to be a congregation – more difficult than any other time I can remember in my 24 years in serving congregations. How can we live together as the body of Christ, with differing perspectives? How do we support other parishioners who have different perspectives? How do we graciously challenge one another when a perspective is the opposite of what we hold to be true and faithful – without pretending to know the mind of God, condemning our kin, or trying to win the argument?

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we need have no fear of making mistakes nor confessing sins, for we are held together as one body by Christ's abundant and inexhaustible grace. Please know that I welcome you to come and share with me when you understand things differently, or perceive that I have erred in judgment.

In Christ,
Pastor Ingrid