

Sermon for the Second Sunday After the Epiphany: John 1:29-42

The Rev. Brooks Cato

These days, we're a little too familiar with Pilate's infamous question, "What is truth?" Well, with Pilate in mind, I reached out to a dear friend living in Minneapolis. We spoke for an hour, which should say something, 'cause I hate talking on the phone. Now of course, nobody's 100% unbiased, but this person's directly experiencing what we only see in headlines, so maybe it's worth hearing 'em out. My friend described how strange it is to go about your regular day doing the mundane tasks life requires while everything else is going on. They said, "You still gotta do laundry. You still gotta do dishes. You still gotta pick up your kids, and then you hear the whistles." (For those of you who may not know, community members use whistles to announce ICE's presence.) My friend described a rare moment of downtime when they decided to make a cup of tea to relax for once. But before the cup was finished, they got a call to go watch what ICE was getting up to. Once that scene ran its course, my friend remembered a package in the backseat of their car and figured they might as well stop by the post office since they were already out. Y'all, that's weird. They went from sipping tea to observing fascism to running errands, like it was just another Tuesday 'cause, of course, it was just another Tuesday. They do everyday stuff for so many families that've had people taken. People who use laundromats are afraid to leave the house, so community members do their laundry for them. There are folks grocery shopping for those too afraid to leave their homes. They're trying to work with landlords to figure out what to do about rent after a breadwinner's been taken. For far too many terrified people, day-to-day concerns, obligations, and errands don't get taken care of unless somebody helps. This isn't an overloaded welfare system; this is regular people terrified into hiding by government forces.

You may've heard the story about a six-month old who was hospitalized because of tear gas. Some blame the father for bringing his child to a protest with a sort of "you should've known better" attitude. My friend says that couldn't be further from the truth. They weren't at a protest. ICE was in their neighborhood, and the father tried to leave his own home to get himself and his kids away from the disturbance. He got permission from ICE to leave. Think about that for a second. He had to get permission to leave his home. And as he was trying to leave and after they gave him permission, ICE deployed a flashbang and a teargas canister targeting his vehicle. Teargas seeped in at such a high concentration that his six-month old baby stopped breathing. My friend described another shooting, the inappropriate use of less-lethal weaponry, regular beatings. Minneapolis resists as intensely as they do because being taken by ICE is seen as a death sentence. My friend says, "We are not organized. We don't have weapons. We're not equipped to fight back. We're just little guys trying to protect our neighbors and our city from an invasion force. That's what this feels like."

Now you may be thinking, "Surely they could just stay home." The mayor actually told people to do just that, but, as my friend says, "home is where ICE is attacking." They go door-to-door, taking people directly from their homes. Even if they come to a white citizen's home, at best, ICE demands to know "where the immigrants are," but they aren't always so kind as to use the word "immigrants." The mayor also told people not to "take the bait," which my friend dismissed because in their words, "how is helping our neighbors taking the bait?" My friend described a scene where ICE targeted a single household and used so much teargas on that one house that the effects could be felt for three neighborhood blocks. Even inside other homes, the teargas came in. Ya see, lots of houses in Minneapolis use furnaces, and furnaces pull air in from outside to heat up. Thanks to the enormous amount of teargas deployed, that outside air is teargas air blown through furnaces into living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and nurseries. It's winter, y'all. They can't just turn off the heat. Their jails are full, so ICE is stashing the taken in places without bathrooms or medical facilities. Those places're so chaotic that lawyers are having trouble finding their clients. Sometimes even ICE can't say for certain where

people've been taken. When they can, often they've already taken 'em to a detention center in a different state. Hundreds of people taken by ICE across the country are unaccounted for stirring fears for those peoples' fates. When my friend and people like them see ICE coming, they aren't impeding arrests to stir the pot. They strongly believe that people who end up inside ICE vehicles will never be seen again. Those who make it back are the lucky few. I could keep going, but for the sake of time and your compassionate hearts, I'll stop here. I've asked my friend to share more, and if they do, I'll pass it on. Awful as it is that we can't trust what we're told to see, I hope having eyes in the middle of the storm paints a clearer picture.

Now, I know some of y'all are wondering what this has to do with Jesus or church or even these particular readings. Well, here's the thing. Christianity and Judaism both're fundamentally communal religions. We exist not only to better ourselves but to better our communities. In today's readings alone, community shows up as "the People," "Israel," "Jacob," "the tribes," "the great congregation," "the church," "all those in every place who call on the name of our lord Jesus Christ," and "the fellowship of God's Son." That communal focus isn't meant only for the good of the congregation. We're told to be "a light to the nations," not just existing alongside our neighbors but actively serving, inspiring, and living intertwined with them. Just as the psalm asks for God's compassion, we share our compassion, too. We do this, in Paul's words, "together with all those in every place." Right out the gate in John, Jesus starts building a community of close followers, the Disciples, pulled from all over with different backgrounds and expertise, from fishermen to a tax collector to a physician. He needs people, and he needs different kinds of people. If it's good enough for Jesus...

Y'all when things get bad, people have a tendency to draw in tighter. We lop off whatever's at the margins of our existence, including people. I suppose it's a natural inclination, but we can't fall into that trap, especially not now. Those at the margins are the ones that need to be included the most not just for their safety but for the health of the community as a whole. Now, we're not Minneapolis, we're not a big city, and at least right now, a lot of folks here can go about life as if nothing's amiss. But I don't think that illusion of insulation from the madness is gonna last. I have no idea what's coming our way or when, but I'm certain *something's* coming.

Problem is, we don't know the specifics enough to plan for whatever that something ends up being. But if my friend's stories are any indication, the best thing we can do to get ready is strengthen our community. Make our connections tighter. Figure out what you can do that the community needs, and do it. Figure out what we can do, and do it. Take our many gifts and focus 'em outward. We gotta get right up there next to people with our hands, our hearts, our particular gifts offered freely. And we gotta do all that knowing that the community's also got hands and hearts and gifts, and we need them to share freely, too. This already tight community needs knitting together even tighter with no one left out of the process. Without cutting anyone out, bring every circle of our existence closer, especially those way out at the margins. That's not just good resistance, that's good Christianity. Look, I have no idea what things're gonna look like in the coming weeks, but the stronger our community is, the better positioned we'll be to meet it. And the better positioned we'll be to meet it specifically *as Christians*; as St. Thomas'; as Hamiltononians; as a pulsing, blinding, unconquerable light to the nations...or at least a light to this nation.

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