



Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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A Pastoral Word to the Synod after Charlottesville

August 15, 2017

Mary, Mother of our Lord

Dear People of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod,

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus be with you all.

In the wake of the deeply troubling events in Charlottesville, Virginia over the weekend, I offer you a pastoral word of comfort, encouragement and invitation.

A word of comfort: We turn to the Lord in our distress. The psalms are filled with innumerable versions of the ancient human cry for help. The narrative of Holy Scripture is a passionate and consistent appeal for the Lord to look and save as in the days of old. Last Sunday's Prayer of the Day so aptly named the "storms that rage within and around us and cause us to be afraid." When we witness or experience events beyond our wisdom and strength to control, we cry out with the words of St. Peter, "Lord, save me!" remembering that in response, our Lord Jesus, whose very name means "The Lord Saves," immediately reached out and caught him by the hand. Because our Lord Jesus embodies God's saving action for a world overwhelmed by the destructive consequence of its own sin, we cry out in our day, "Lord, save us as you saved your people of old." This is our desperate prayer; but it is also our comfort and our strength, for by faith we trust and believe that our Lord saves.

These days we mourn with the families of Heather Heyer, H. Jay Cullen, and Berke M. M. Bates. And we grieve the great harm done to all who are targets of terrorism and victims of violence, whose names we may not know. In your grief, be comforted by the history and promise of our faith. Plunge into the psalms, even if you find yourself drowning, as it were, in their collective lament, for we find the salvation of our God no more clearly than in those places where our wisdom and strength fails. And then comfort others with the consolation you yourself have received from Christ Jesus. The Church, at its best, is a people who have come through death to life, and who can then speak a confident word of comfort to all

those who are lost in death and are hard-pressed by its agents: hate and fear, pride and despair, violence, apathy and disrespect.

A word of encouragement: St. Paul teaches us to proclaim the Gospel in season and out of season, and to lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Our Lord Jesus, speaking to the church in Ephesus through the seer, John, called them back to the love they had at first. The Church is called to bear witness to Christ in the world. We do this most clearly in the public celebration of the liturgy, in which the Word of God is proclaimed as Law and Gospel and the Sacraments of Grace are administered according to the Gospel. We do this also in the baptismal vocation of self-giving love, the new commandment which Jesus taught his disciples. And we do this in the faithful exercise of our secular vocations.

It is our common calling that is the foundation beneath our church's collective, public voice, with which we repudiate racism and white supremacy. Our shared baptismal vocation is the solid depth to our personal renunciation of violence, hate, and bigotry. It is Jesus' call to love that is manifest in our interest in and care for our neighbors. Some of us have public vocations in law enforcement and politics, in medical care and teaching, in counseling, mentoring, and funding programs of social care and support; it is in the faithful exercise of these public vocations that we work to build communities of respect, safety and abundant life.

Be encouraged in your public celebration of the liturgy, to attend to that work with all the best of your creativity and passion. And be encouraged in your baptismal witness, renouncing again, daily, all the things that draw you from God. And also, in your public vocations, seek the best of human community in the places God has given you to work, for in all these ways the Church, at its best, stands against all evil and shines the light of Christ into every darkness.

A word of invitation: This is a difficult word to articulate well. Please bear with me. I invite you to study Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom these days. That vision is found in Isaiah 11:1-9 and again in Isaiah 65:17-25. This vision describes life together as it is restored by God's saving action. There are images of beauty and hope found here, images that resonate to our day. If you do a Google image search for "the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together," you will see how fully this image of hope has captured the imagination of many artists over many years. (Please do use appropriate caution with any Google image search, as you may be presented with things you did not go looking for!) The work of Christ to redeem the world looks like this vision from Isaiah. St. Paul teaches us that Christ has broken down every barrier, taking to his cross the dividing walls between people. You may find it helpful to allow the various animals to stand as metaphors for people now living in violent opposition to each other. Some of the animals in Isaiah's image are predators. Some are their intended prey. But in this image, they live together in peace.

Now look more closely at two verses: Isaiah 11:7 and Isaiah 65:25. In both these verses we read that the lion shall eat straw like the ox. Pay attention to this, for although there is authentic joy in the many pictures artists have given us of lions and lambs lying down together in peace, very few are bold enough to notice that this peace is only possible when the lion's identity has been radically transformed. The lion in Isaiah's vision is no longer a predator. It grazes for its food as cattle do.

The Church appropriately sings with joy that “all are welcome,” that we are called to exercise radical hospitality. This is right and good; it is a declaration of the promise of Jesus' redeeming work. At the same time, the Church rightly rejects behavior that harms and destroys. “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,” God declares.

I invite you to search for the truth that lies in the slender space between welcoming all people and rejecting behavior that harms. It is extraordinarily difficult to do this well. It is a spiritual exercise. The book of Hebrews (4:12-13) teaches us that the word of God is able to do this work, to divide soul from spirit, joints from marrow, and to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Our best efforts to do this are clumsy and blunt, and too often tear up wheat in our effort to be rid of weeds. We may be served in our efforts by naming and purposefully rejecting evil ideologies and destructive behavior rather than groups of people, for the practice of rejecting groups of people, *per se*, is an ideology that we find repugnant.

And I invite you to turn with me today to consider Mary, the mother of our Lord, who was with her son Jesus as he exercised the unique ability of the Word of God to distinguish between person and behavior, saying from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

With you in Christ,



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