The Church is a Mercy Place!

by Rev. Matthew C. Harrison
Executive Director
LCMS World Relief and Human Care

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LCMS World Relief and Human Care
1333 South Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63122-7295
800-248-1930, ext. 1390 • www.lcms.org/worldrelief

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"I'm goin' t'die! **I'm goin' t'die!**" Zion lives its life-giving life in Christ in the heart of what was Fort Wayne's most troubled neighborhood. But even this congregation, so used to seeing the unveiled sins of humanity (more easily concealed in suburbia!), was more than a little shocked at what it beheld. Attendance was high. Expectation was joyous yet solemn. The Sanctus had just been "belted" out as the massive pipe organ shook the plaster of the old ornate gothic sanctuary. From behind the altar I had seen him come in, move to the lectern side, sit; then move to the front of the pulpit side. The Lord's Prayer ended, he rose, faced the congregation and began blowing kisses, shouting, "I'm goin' t'die!" Behind the altar, arms outstretched, facing the congregation, I moved only my index finger (as frantically as one digit can be moved!), directing four rather perplexed ushers to deal with the poor man. They moved closer. He wobbled. Wide, intoxicated eyes peered at them with fear. His large body became tense, ready to "fight or flee" as he listed backward, "cornered." Not wanting a "scene," the ushers paused and looked helplessly back to me. "Now what, Pastor?" I read in their eyes.

Complexities are common at the "rough edge" of the church's life (the mercy edge!) as it is confronted by real physical and spiritual need. It has always been so.

Jesus faced these complexities, misunderstandings and challenges. Yet He never failed to proclaim His Gospel of forgiveness and bear witness to himself as the Divine Savior by works of mercy. The crowds pursued Him for bread, not the bread of life, yet He did not cease to deliver both (John 6). The apostolic church faced similar challenges. Was the church's task "word and sacrament" or caring for the needy? In affirming the essential nature of the church's "marks" (Gospel and sacrament) which tell us surely where the church is present, we dare not miss the fact that love and mercy toward the needy mark the church's corporate life. If not, it risks denial of the very Gospel and sacraments which constitute it. The apostles ordained the seven to "wait tables" (i.e. bread to the widows) that they might not "give up preaching the Word" (Acts 6:2). However, we dare never forget (at the very risk of the "destruction of the Church," says Sasse) that the apostles established a churchly office to care for the needy in its midst, and for those who

came to it from without with spiritual and physical need (Gal. 6:10). From Jesus, to the apostolic church, to the Missouri Synod (see Walther's "Proper Form of Christian Congregation" on caring for the poor) it has always been so. But why?

"Missions! That's it! We care in order to evangelize the needy! Find the need, meet it and grow the church!" I don't know about you, but I'm not happy at all with this idea. It's very pragmatic, very American, but not particularly Lutheran. Don't get me wrong. I'm fully convinced that the Bible teaches that eternal life is only through faith in Christ and His cross, and so evangelism is an essential part of the church's life (Matt. 28:19). But it smacks of "bait and switch" to me. Jesus proclaimed the Gospel and cared for the needy because that's who He is as mercy incarnate. Mercy responds to human need and suffering, whether spiritual or physical. The church doesn't reach out to those in need with some "whiz bang" program *because it's guaranteed to fill pews*. Proclaiming Jesus and loving the neighbor has to do with who and what the church is as the body of Christ. Where proclamation of the Gospel or acts of love and mercy are missing, the church's life is not what Christ intended it to be. Mere "social gospel" substitutes our work for Christ's. Proclamation absent love renders us a mere "clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13).

Why should the church show mercy to the needy? "Simple! It's Christ's command! Love your neighbor as yourself!" This is certainly true. I don't want to minimize the importance of God's law in guiding us as His church. And yet, not only is the law not the proper motivation for Christian acts of mercy, the church shows mercy to the needy for reasons deeper than mere command. The church has a "mandate" for mercy. A "mandate" (comes from *mandatum*) is a "given" thing. The church performs acts of mercy because this is what it's given to be! A mercy place! The saints in Matthew 25 aren't even aware of how they served Christ by serving the needy! They did these things because they were a people of mercy. Loehe (so tremendously influential in the founding of Synod, institutions of mercy, the deaconess movement, etc.) expressed this beautifully: "God's mercy (*Barmherzigkeit*) is divine love meeting need. When divine mercy meets human sin, that mercy becomes the grace of forgiveness. When divine love meets human suffering, it becomes merciful care and healing."

Why should the church care for those in need? "I'm still not convinced it should. The church should be on about preaching and the administration of the sacraments, period." Well… you would certainly

agree that each individual has the mandate to be merciful to others within his/her vocation ("Here consider your station in life"). Rendering love to the neighbor is in large measure the content of the priesthood of the baptized ("Present your bodies as living sacrifices... the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" Rom. 12). So that you begin to see mercy as the church's corporate task, consider St. Paul's collection for the needy church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1ff; Acts 11:28; 2 Cor. 8:1-15; 9:12-14; and Acts 24:7). Individuals provide gifts. These gifts are collected by congregations, and even by whole "national churches" (Macedonia). More than that, they are delivered to the church in Jerusalem by none other than the Apostle Paul. This "churchly" life of mercy is expressed by Luther in the Smalcald Articles: "The church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ... and keep diligently together in unity of teaching, faith, sacraments, prayers, and works of love" (S.A. II.4.9.). That says it all.

Luther, in fact, left us stirring descriptions of the church as a mercy place, and of its gospel-driven motivation to be merciful. The Reformer often speaks of Christ's incarnation and sacrificial death as our motivation to be merciful to the needy (including the non-believer!). He wrote to the Duke of Saxony who was ill:

> *Our Lord and Savior Jesus has left us a commandment which applies equally to all Christians, namely, that we are to render the works of mercy (Luke 6:36) to those who are afflicted, and that we are visit the sick, try to free the captives, and do similar things for our neighbor so that the evils of the present may be somewhat lessened. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself gave us the brightest example of this commandment when, because of his infinite love for the race of men, he descended from the bosom of the Father into our misery and our prison, that is, into our flesh and our most wretched life, and took upon himself the penalty for our sins so that we might be saved. And while we have the duty to visit and console all who are afflicted with sickness, we are especially obligated to those of the household of faith* ("Fourteen Consolations," LW 42:122).

His comments in "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ" of 1519 (LW 35) are a "must read" in order to understand the church's work of mercy as part of the church's corporate life. Luther offers an antidote for a individualistic "Jesus and me" piety regarding the Lord's Supper:

> *There your heart must go out in love and devotion and learn that this sacrament is a sacrament of love, and that love and service are given you and you again must render love and service to Christ and His needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in His holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing; you must fight, work, pray, and if you cannot do more, have heartfelt sympathy* (LW 35:54).

"You must fight, work, pray." There are no words more apt for describing the church's challenge to be a "mercy place" today. It is often very difficult for a parish to understand its life as one that receives Christ's gifts at altar, font and pulpit, then moves out to the world, "in fervent love for all." There has never been a more complex era for Lutheran institutions of mercy, which sorely need and want to be reconnected with congregations. We as the LCMS have opportunities the world over to share Christ's mercy in word and deed—and so very much good is taking place (at the Synod level: LCMS World Relief and Human Care! Institutional Chaplaincy! Housing! Life Ministries! Health Ministries! etc.). But as with all measurable things, there is so very much more which can be done, such tremendous need to re-think and re-commit to what it means to be Lutheran and merciful, as institutions of care, and as congregations, districts and Synod. There is need for us to revisit and recommit to what it means for us to be Lutheran as we "cooperate in externals" with other Christians. We must not sacrifice our clear confessional and biblical Lutheran convictions even as we recognize the breadth of "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." Where shall we find the wherewithal for the tasks at hand in this complex world?

"What do we do now, Pastor?" The ushers' eyes were pleading. The entire congregation was frozen, silent. I left the altar. Soon I had extended my arm around his shoulders. "Friend, we are really glad that you are here with us. Let me help you." His tension eased as I literally folded him into the green, Trinity season chasuble I was wearing. It was ample enough to cover us both. Not a snicker, not a smirk marked the faces of the silent observers as we made our way to the rear of the sanctuary. I handed him to others, and returned to altar. The "sacrament of love" commenced. After the service I sought him out. He had slipped away. I never saw him again. Somehow he knew we were a "mercy place" yet to this day I have a nagging visceral disquiet about him. We failed him.

Yet much more ample than that chasuble that covered an unworthy servant of Christ, and a poor soul trapped by sin, death and devil, is Holy Baptism. How shall we deal with our consciences disquieted by our failures at mercy? Where shall we find the strength of faith and fortitude as the church to be ever more what Christ has made us and called us to be: A mercy place? How shall we face the complexities of remaining faithful to our beautiful Lutheran confession in today's vexing world? Luther, no Christ himself, has an answer:

> *"We must hold boldly and fearlessly to our baptism, and hold it up against all sins and terrors of conscience, and humbly say, 'I know full well that I have not a single work which is pure, but I am baptized, and through my baptism God, Who cannot lie, has bound Himself in a covenant with me, not to count my sin against me, but to slay it and blot it out.'"* ("Treatise on Baptism," LW, Phila. Ed., 1:63).

O Lord Christ, Fount of everlasting compassion, grant Your church on earth grace according to Your promise, that it may be the channel of your mercy to all those in need, body and soul. And may Your merciful washing ever more beget in us merciful living.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Study questions

1. What is the "bait and switch" mentioned on page 2?

2. Review Paul's model for collecting and delivering aid to the Church in Jerusalem. (Look up the Bible passages noted on p. 3.) How is the "corporate church" involved?

3. Our motivation to be merciful is more than a command. (See p. 3) Explain.

4. What does one's baptism have to do with this? (p. 5)

5. What are some ways your church — and you — can "fight, work and pray" (see p. 4-5) for mercy?