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## WITNESS AS MERCY: SHARING THE GOSPEL IN TIMES OF TRAGEDY

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BY MARK A. WOOD

There is a silly idea about being a witness of Jesus that insists that we must earn the right or gain permission to speak God's Word to people before we can witness to them. This idea is silly because it goes against the very clear statement of Jesus that all authority in heaven and earth belongs to Him and that He has extended that authority to His Church for the express purpose of making disciples.<sup>1</sup> Jesus has given us all the permission we need to speak the Gospel. He has given us the right, even the responsibility, to proclaim His Word. It is silly to think that we must seek permission or authority or rights from any other person. Yet, as with many silly ideas, this idea touches on an important truth. While we have the right and authority to speak of Jesus, we may not have a receptive person to whom to speak.

As our culture grows increasingly diverse in terms of religion and spirituality, and as people further embrace the ideologies of this world, it is becoming more difficult for us as witnesses of Jesus to find ways in which to engage people with the Gospel. The shift in evangelism approaches, from abrupt engagements with unfamiliar people in a direct manner to seeking opportunities to speak of Jesus to the people with whom interact in our everyday lives, speaks to the challenges of being witnesses in our current context. This move to (or, more accurately, back to) evangelism in the context of our vocations naturally provides openings for us to speak God's Word to people as we engage them in natural and, typically, long-term relationships. The various relationships which our vocations provide do not automatically result in the people in our lives being open to hearing of Jesus from us. However, these relationships do place us in a

strategic position to speak God's Word to people when (not if) life events open them up to hearing of Christ.

There are many and various events in people's lives that open them up to hearing of Christ from us, especially when they have existing relationships with us. Some of these events grow over a period of time as people mature, sense an absence of meaning, seek some greater purpose for life or grow disappointed with their idols. Other events are happy occasions — such as marriage or the birth of a child — that bring about a significant change in people's lives and set them to searching for a solid foundation for living. Still others are tragic events that shake people to their core. In the loss and trauma of these events all the pretenses of the world fall away. Left without a foundation on which to stand in the midst of these events, people look and long for the meaning, relief and hope that their idols could not and cannot provide.



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<sup>1</sup> cf. Matt. 28:18–19.

As horrible and destructive as these tragedies are for people, they provide amazing opportunities for us to show the mercy of Christ to our friends, neighbors, relatives and others. However, if we are not careful and deliberate in responding to their tragedies, we may miss the opportunity to show them the fullness of God's mercy.

### **The Value of Mercy for Witness**

The impact of tragedies varies. They range in scope from large-scale national (even international) events to those affecting a single family. They also span the spectrum from those that simply disrupt life to those that devastatingly destroy life. Whether catastrophic or inconvenient, troubling life events are always an opportunity to show Christ's mercy to the people who are affected by them. Showing mercy in the midst of tragedy can have a tremendous impact on the lives of the people whom we serve. Often that impact is very apparent to us. We can see how the mercy that we extend to people provides them with comfort, relief and hope. The more tangible the mercy extended, the more apparent its impact can be to us. Seeing the ways that our works of mercy affect the people who receive them is compelling. It encourages us to show mercy to other people in other circumstances. It satisfies our desire to show Christ's compassion to those who suffer as a response to the mercy that He has shown to us.

The tangible and satisfying nature of mercy work can create a problem for us. The potential problem is not in the work itself. We know that Jesus has called us to show compassion to those who suffer. We also know that we cannot contain His love and grace. We are moved to show mercy and compassion to people because we have received Christ's mercy and compassion. Extending what we have received to the people in our everyday lives is part and parcel of our Christian life. Indeed, it is a critical element of the one reason that God keeps us in this world. Martin Luther makes this point in his 1523 sermon on 1 Peter 2:9. He wrote, "We live on earth only so that we should be a help to other people. Otherwise, it would be best if God would strangle us and let us die as soon as we were baptized and had begun to believe."<sup>2</sup> As those who understand ourselves to be strangers and exiles in this fallen and troubled world,<sup>3</sup> we would add our amen to Dr. Luther's assertion. We would also see our works of mercy as faithful responses to his understanding of our purpose — our *only* purpose — for being here. And they may well be. But they may also fall terribly short of that purpose. Luther goes on to explain the specific manner in which we are to be of help to other people: "For this reason, however, he lets us live that we may bring other people also to faith as he has done for us."

The sole purpose of our being in the world is to bear witness of Christ so that, through the Word, other people would come to faith in Him. How do works of mercy fit into this purpose? Actually, they fit extremely well when we understand that mercy can open doors for sharing the Gospel. But opening doors for the Gospel is all that works of mercy can do. They do not, in and of themselves, bear witness of Christ. Through our acts of mercy we may be afforded the opportunity to "to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you,"<sup>4</sup> but they do not and cannot convey the reason for our hope. Misunderstanding this leads to other silly ideas regarding evangelism including "you may be the only Bible that another person ever reads" and "preach the Gospel at all times; use words when necessary." More than silly, these dangerous axioms reduce the primacy of the Word of God in our witness. If you end up being the only Bible that someone reads, that person will perish. If you express a Gospel without words, you are expressing another Gospel which is no Gospel at all.<sup>5</sup>

Whenever we are given the opportunity to show the compassion of Jesus in works of mercy we have also been given the opportunity show the full extent of His compassion by sharing His Word of forgiveness, life and salvation. Showing mercy without proclaiming the Word falls short of witnessing. We should show mercy whenever and wherever we can. Doing so displays the love of Christ that is in us. But we are not witnesses of Jesus by our actions alone, however loving and good they may be. We are witnesses of Jesus when we speak His Word. Mercy without proclamation is not witnessing.

### **Temporal Mercy is Insufficient Mercy**

While the need for temporal mercy is often very apparent to us because of the circumstances in which we conduct our works of mercy, it is easy for us to overlook the need for eternal mercy in those same circumstances. The urgency of people's need for food, shelter and clothing often overshadows the urgency of their need for God's grace. It can be difficult for us as Christ's witnesses in these situations to be mindful of people's spiritual condition which, unlike their

<sup>2</sup> WA 12:267.3–7, 318.25–319.6 quoted in Volker Stolle, *The Church Comes from All Nations*, trans. Klaus Detlev Schulz (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> cf. Heb. 11:13.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Gal. 1:6–7.

physical condition, was just as shipwrecked prior to the disaster in which we encounter them as it is when we serve them in mercy. We should, of course, attend to the pressing physical needs of people who have lost their homes, possessions and other earthly necessities and do so without compelling them to be an audience for our Gospel presentation. We do not want to fall into the heartless attitude condemned in James 2:15–16 (‘If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?’). We know better than to disregard a person’s physical needs as we seek to bring him the love and compassion of Jesus. Are we just as cautious about falling into disregard for the person’s soul?

Temporal mercy, through important and often essential, is not mercy enough. The mercy of sharing God’s Word, which always has the potential of being an eternal mercy, should be our constant desire and the active intent of all of our works of mercy. We need to consider the flip side of James 1:15–16, which would go something like, “If someone is without faith and lacking in salvation, and one of you meets his physical needs and says nothing of the Gospel, leaving him without that which is needed for eternal life, what good is that?” Undoubtedly, we are doing good by clothing, sheltering and comforting those who are experience trauma and loss in the face of tragedy. But, in the end, what good have we done if we do not make use of the opportunities to speak of Jesus that come through our acts of mercy? Temporal mercy is insufficient mercy. There is a greater mercy to which we are called to extend to people in all of life’s circumstances, including and especially tragedies.

### **The Greater Need, The Greater Mercy**

All people have needs. People in crisis have urgent needs. Moved by the love and compassion of Jesus, we want to meet the urgent needs of people experiencing the losses and trauma of crises. But those needs are often complex and can be difficult to discern. We realize that the needs of body, soul and spirit are intertwined and that it is necessary to meet the needs of the whole person in order to be effective in serving them. However, in the midst of the crisis and in the face of great need, we may find ourselves addressing only one kind of need with our works of mercy — and inadvertently neglecting people’s greater need.

In many emergency situations, we can most readily see and understand people’s physical needs. The shortage or absence of food, water, clothing and shelter requires us to immediately address meeting the basic physical needs of those whom we serve. We are not only quick to address these needs through our acts of mercy, we are comfortable and confident in doing so. In addition to the obvious physical needs, we recognize that people also have emotional needs. They need support, comfort and encouragement for coping, grieving and hoping. While we recognize these needs, we may not see them as being as urgent or important as physical needs. Emotional needs are not as evident as physical needs and they are often suppressed by people as they struggle to deal with keeping body and soul together. Yet, emotional needs are frequently a greater need than physical needs, especially in the long run. While we often feel less qualified and equipped to meet people’s emotional needs than their physical needs, we are supportive and caring when we do seek to address them.

Physical needs and emotional needs are real needs for people, including people experiencing crisis. These needs should not be neglected nor played down. These needs provide us with excellent opportunities to share the love of Christ with our neighbors through works of mercy. But we should be mindful that these are people’s lesser needs and, in a very real way, should be our lesser concern. We are always at risk of avoiding the greater need that people have, whether we are engaging them in crises or in everyday life. That greater need of all people is their spiritual need. In that greater need is our calling to extend a greater mercy.

What mercy is greater than meeting the physical and emotional needs of people suffering from tragedy? The mercy of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Giving witness of Jesus is the greatest mercy that we can extend to another person.

### **Ultimate Mercy**

Martin Luther spoke of the greatest good that we can do for our neighbor in his treatise “Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope and the Bishops Falsely So Called.” In reference to Ezek. 3:17–19, Luther asserted that, “the preacher would commit the greatest sin against love if he were silent and disregarded the greatest good, the salvation of his neighbor’s soul, to whom he certainly also owes the smallest good, food and clothing.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of bringing mercy to people in tragedy, what Luther says is true of the preaching office is also true of us as Christ’s witnesses. We owe our neighbor the smallest good, food and clothing, but we need to be ever mindful of our neighbor’s greater need and not neglect or disregard the greatest good, the salvation of [our] neighbor’s soul.

<sup>6</sup> *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39, P. 250

Of course, this understanding of the primacy of sharing God's Word with people in need did not originate with Luther. We find this pattern in the earthly ministry of Jesus. One example of this is found in the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand men (plus women and children) in the sixth chapter of St. Mark's Gospel. Seeking rest for Himself and His disciples, Jesus made His way to a desolate place. However, many people had gone ahead of Him and had gathered in that desolate place to engage Him. His reaction shows us how Jesus understood the importance and primacy of witness in mercy: "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things."<sup>7</sup> Jesus showed His compassion to the people who were like sheep without a shepherd first and foremost by speaking the Word to them. The later miraculous feeding came about because of the length of time Jesus spent teaching the crowd and demonstrates that Jesus also concerned Himself with the smallest good of the people's physical needs.

In another instance of Jesus having compassion on crowds of people because "they were helpless and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd,"<sup>8</sup> He responded to their needs by calling, instructing and sending the Twelve to show mercy by addressing both the spiritual and physical needs of the people to whom He was sending them. He told the Disciples, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons."<sup>9</sup> In these and the instructions that followed, the primacy of proclamation is made clear by our Savior. Witness was at the center of Christ's work of mercy. This is true of the various ways that He showed mercy to people who were suffering from disease, disabilities and even death. It is also true of His most merciful work, dying our death on the Cross. From the Cross Jesus continued to bear witness to the Word of God as He sought to show the fullness of His ultimate act of mercy. As we proclaim the Cross of Jesus to those who are struggling, suffering and grieving in the face of tragedy, we are extending the ultimate act of mercy in our witness.

Witness is mercy. More than that, witness is our highest form of mercy. All other acts of mercy are, in Luther's terms, the smallest good. It is good, right and proper for us to engage in these smallest goods as we are the very means by which the Lord chooses to provide daily bread to those in tragedy. In doing so, we must guard against neglecting the greatest good of witness. The starting point of doing this is to be convinced that witness is mercy.

### **Do We Really See Witness as Mercy?**

We consider feeding those who are hungry, clothing those who are without clothes, sheltering those who are homeless and encouraging those who are hopeless as acts of mercy. We are right to do so. These are acts of mercy. Even people who do not confess Christ see them as acts of mercy and many unbelieving people of good will engage in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and responding to disasters. The Church is not alone in showing mercy to people in times of tragedy. Instead, we find ourselves operating in an increasingly crowded field of people bringing aid and relief when disasters occur. When this is the case, we are starkly reminded that there is only one form of mercy that we can uniquely provide to people in times of tragedy. Yet, we may not see this unique offering as being equal to or as important as the mercy that others can and do provide. We may not even consider witness as mercy at all.

Imagine a situation in which a disaster has occurred and we, as the Church, respond in mercy. The controlling entity for the disaster response (e.g., local government, governor's office, FEMA) welcomes our involvement, but insists that we agree to certain restrictions in order to participate in the relief effort. Most of those restrictions are reasonable for the safety and well-being of all involved, but one is an ideological restriction that prohibits any activity of evangelism or proselytizing. Would we agree with the restriction on speaking of Jesus (i.e., meeting people's spiritual needs) in order to extend mercy in meeting their physical and emotional needs? Do we see value in being present as God's people even if we are muted by such a restriction? Would we not, even if reluctantly, accept this restriction in order to show Christ's mercy?

Now consider a situation in which a disaster has occurred and the response is so great that there is no need for us to provide physical or emotional aid. The controlling entity in this response effort values the contribution of the Church in times of crisis and invites us to participate in the relief effort in the limited role of providing spiritual aid. We are restricted from giving people food, clothing, shelter or financial assistance. All we are permitted to do is to

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 6:34

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 9:36

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 10:5-8

share God's Word with the people affected by the tragedy. It is unthinkable that we would refuse to participate in the disaster relief effort under this restriction. But would we consider that we have done enough for people if all we could do was share God's Word with them? Would we be convinced that we have shown mercy to people in tragic circumstances without being the people who brought them physical aid? Or would we be envious of those who were permitted and able to provide real mercy to those who were suffering?

We understand that spiritual needs are of far greater importance than physical needs. But if we were put into the position of having to choose between meeting people's physical needs or their spiritual needs in the midst of a crisis, which would we choose? Or, more realistically, what will our response be when we are confronted with restrictions on speaking God's Word in order to be able to participate in bringing aid and relief to suffering people? As unlikely as the second scenario above is, the first scenario is very real and likely to become more prevalent in our culture. The growing anti-religious sentiment and the increasing number of individuals and organizations that are committed to showing mercy without witness will make it more difficult for the Church to insist on showing mercy with witness. How will we show the greater mercy of serving in His name when His name is removed from us?

### **Witness and Mercy: Both/And Not Either/Or**

Fortunately, in most situations there are still ample opportunities for us to extend both temporal and eternal mercy to people in tragedies. It is far more likely that we ourselves, rather than external forces, are the limiting factor in including witness in our acts of mercy. In other words, in most cases no one is telling us that we cannot speak of Jesus as we engage people through meeting their physical and emotion needs but we simply fail to make good use of the opportunities to address their spiritual needs by bearing witness of Jesus. This happens because we tend to see speaking the Good News of Jesus (i.e., witness) and meeting the physical needs of people in crisis (i.e., mercy) as independent activities — an either/or proposition.

It is true that there are some circumstances in which witness and mercy are an either/or proposition. In these cases — which are more the exception than the norm — we do what we are able to do. When we can only show mercy we do so without witness praying that the Lord will somehow open the door for someone else to speak of Jesus. When we can only bear witness of Jesus without addressing the physical needs of people dealing with tragic circumstances, we speak God's Word of hope, comfort, life and forgiveness praying that our gracious God will provide the people's physical needs according to His mercy. However, in most situations witness and mercy are intrinsically and wonderfully a both/and opportunity.

### **Making the Most of the Both/And Opportunity**

When we consider how to share the Gospel with people who are experiencing tragedies, we need to be on guard against the persistent silly ideas about evangelism. These include the silly ideas that we have to earn the right to speak of Jesus and, by corollary, that we have earned the right by providing for people's physical or emotional needs. We should always bear in mind that, while we are always under the obligation to speak the Good News of Jesus, no one is ever under an obligation to listen to us. We do not ever have to earn the right, but we do need to gain a hearing.

How do we gain a hearing for the Gospel when serving people in the midst of crises? What do we do when we gain a hearing?

Gaining a hearing for the Gospel should come naturally when serving people if we understand that we are providing that service in our vocations as neighbors. As neighbors, we are extending mercy to people in need in the context of a relationship. Whether we are showing mercy to people in our own community or in a distant land, we should view our work as extending Christ's compassion to the neighbors with whom He has placed us. Knowing that it is His desire that "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,"<sup>10</sup> we can be confident that He is at work in the circumstances of our service to make a way for the speaking of His Word. We need not — and ought not — force an opening, but look for the openings as they develop in the context of our vocational service.

When those openings do develop, we should be ready to make effective use of them by using an approach to sharing God's Word that is relational and contextual. Any approach to showing mercy through witness can only be effective if it is centered in God's Word for both the speaker and the hearer. An approach is effective for the speaker when it focuses him on God's promise that through the speaking of His Word, both the Law and the Gospel, that "it shall not

<sup>10</sup> 1 Tim. 2:4

return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”<sup>11</sup> It is effective for the hearer when the Word of God is shared in a manner in which she can receive it with understanding.

Any of number of approaches may be used effectively to speak of Jesus in the midst of tragedies. However, it is not the approach that makes for an effective witness of Christ in the context of mercy work, but the substance of our witness. That substance is, of course, God’s Word. The LASSIE (Listen-Ask-Seek-Share-Invite-Encourage) approach of the *Every One His Witness*<sup>TM12</sup> evangelism program is an example of a relational, contextual witnessing approach that can be effectively used to bring God’s Word to people in the face of tragedy. The following synopsis of the LASSIE approach provides some key ideas for witnessing to people in the midst of tragedies.

#### *Listen*

The starting point for witnessing to people in crisis is to listen to them. It is important to set aside assumptions and let people inform us of how they view their situations, share what their chief concerns are and express their needs. Listening allows us to gain insight into the people’s perspective on the tragedies that they are experiencing and what, if any, role they see God playing in their circumstances. Listening also demonstrates to people that we care about them as people, not just view them as objects of our works of mercy or evangelistic efforts. As witnesses, we should strive to understand the needs, desires, disappointments, hopes, etc., that people express as we listen to them.

#### *Ask*

The next component of the LASSIE approach is to ask questions. Asking questions encourages people to continue sharing their understanding and perspective of their circumstances. Open-ended, non-threatening questions show people that we are interested in listening to them and they invite people to keep speaking. What a person shares (and does not share) helps guide the nature and depth of the questions we should ask.

#### *Seek*

As we listen and ask, we are also seeking a point of connection with a person. It may seem that the obvious point of connection is the tragedy that has brought us to the person’s service. However, listening and asking often reveal a deeper point of connection, one that transcends the immediate difficult circumstances. It is important to remember that a person in crises has a life and story larger than his present situation. The most effective point of connection may well lie in that larger story.

#### *Share*

Once a point of connection is determined it is important to share something that speaks to it in a meaningful way. We should absolutely avoid platitudes and making empty promises. Telling people facing tragedies that everything is going to be okay or that things always work out for the best will not bring real and lasting comfort — and may close the door to further conversation. People need substance, not wishy-washy sayings. People need the substance that is found only in God’s Word. We must avoid the temptation to share our own stories and focus on sharing Jesus’ story. It is the one story that speaks to the life of every human being — and to every human circumstance.

#### *Invite*

Invitations vary according to context, but they share the same goal of keeping the conversation going in order to share more of God’s Word with a person. As in many other cases, witnessing to a person in the midst of a relief effort or through another act of mercy often drives our invitations to include other witnesses of Jesus. An invitation in these circumstances should revolve around encouraging the person to connect with a local congregation, especially one which is involved in or sponsoring the mercy work. Knowing what that local congregation offers through outreach activities will help shape an effective invitation.

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<sup>11</sup> Is. 55:11

<sup>12</sup> The *Every One His Witness*<sup>TM</sup> evangelism program is administered by the LCMS Witness & Outreach Ministry. Information about this program and the LASSIE approach to witnessing, is available at [lcms.org/witness-outreach](https://lcms.org/witness-outreach).

### *Encourage*

After extending invitations to people, we need to follow up and follow through to encourage them to act upon those invitations. Like the invitation itself, the follow up and follow through may very well come from another person. This is often the case when the invitation is extended by a witness involved in a short term relief or care effort. It is important to gather and provide the necessary information about the invitation and the invitee in order for someone from a local congregation to adequately encourage a person to act upon an invitation. This is best done through a formal system of sharing information that is incorporated into the mercy effort.

This synopsis of using the LASSIE approach for witnessing in the context of mercy work is hardly enough to fully equip a person to share mercy through witness.<sup>13</sup> There is as much art as science in being an effective witness of Jesus in the face of tragedy. Like the other skills required in disaster response, witnessing to people in crises is learned through instruction, preparation and practice.

Making the effort to prepare ourselves to intentionally and effectively speak of Jesus to people who have lost homes, possession, loved ones or hope will enable us to offer people both temporal and eternal mercy — and avoid silly ideas about being witnesses of Jesus as we bring meaning, relief and hope to people who are longing to hear from the God who loves them. While some witnessing approaches are great aids to us as we witness of Jesus in the context of our works of mercy, no human program or method can do what only God's Word can do in the face of tragedy. Many human efforts provide temporal mercy, but only God's Word brings people eternal mercy. When the Word of Christ is the substance of our message, our witness truly is mercy.

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<sup>13</sup> The *Every One His Witness*<sup>™</sup> evangelism program provides a fuller treatment of using the LASSIE approach for witnessing in conjunction with mercy work (including specific kinds of mercy work contexts).