
PASTORAL CARE IN TIMES OF TRAGEDY: AN INTRODUCTION

BY ROSS EDWARD JOHNSON

Christianity has a long and active history of helping in times of tragedy. For example, Martin Luther and Johannes Bugenhagen are known for their merciful and compassionate work while they comforted the sick and dying during the plague of 1527. Another example, of great mercy work was C.F.W. Walther, who under his guidance led The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in opening numerous orphanages for children without hope. However, by-and-large, human care was not properly emphasized in the last half of the 20th century within confessional Lutheran congregations.

The social gospel movement, which rose to prominence following World War I, de-emphasized salvation by faith alone in Christ and instead emphasized ethics. The social gospel's focus was not on preaching and receiving the Sacraments, but rather social activism that improved the quality of life of the community. Unfortunately in their effort to disassociate themselves from this bad theology, many Lutheran pastors “threw the baby out with the bathwater” and inadvertently removed themselves from works of mercy and compassion in times of tragedy.

Another significant factor was the increased influence of the United States government's social welfare system. When the government began to do social work, the Church at large slowly handed over their works of mercy and compassion to the government. The government began to provide aid to the needy, relief during catastrophic disasters and tragedy, and to take responsibility for abandoned or displaced children. Regrettably, this led to the decline of congregational mercy work; some clergy thought that mercy work involved only helping out its church's

members or perhaps only entailed the pastor leading the congregation in Word and Sacrament.

By the 21st century, LCMS churches had declined in their role of mercy work throughout the world. Mercy work in times of tragedy within the LCMS meant sending checks to organizations like Lutheran World Relief (LWR) or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) relief organization known as Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR). This form of mercy work, although not inherently wrong, distanced congregations from actual care. An awareness grew that a vital aspect of congregational life had been lost, and some began to wonder: how had congregations in the LCMS gone from, on the one hand, reaching out to the sick and dying during Luther's time and helping the orphaned and widowed during Walther's to, on the other hand, writing checks and sending them to other organizations? When did LCMS congregations lose sight of the intrinsic nature of their role of mercy and compassion? How did the LCMS



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overlook words in Scripture such as, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16–18)?

Needless to say, the LCMS’ understanding of mercy, compassion and good works needed an overhaul, and a renaissance has begun. Matthew C. Harrison, former executive director of Lutheran World Relief and Human Care (WRHC), raised awareness of congregational mercy work by writing on topics such as mercy work in the Early Church; by reprinting essays that our Lutheran forefathers and the Early Church Fathers wrote that help lay a historical and theological foundation; and by showing pastors that Lutherans have always cared for both spiritual and human need. His work was largely inspired by his experiences following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, revealing the need for greater mercy work at the congregational level. Likewise, John Fale traveled the world as LCMS associate director for Mercy Operations and understood the need to reach out to the sick, downtrodden and afflicted with the Gospel and material needs. These men, and others, revolutionized the way mercy work within the LCMS is understood today.

However, there is still much to be done. In a world full of terrorist acts, distress, natural disasters, death, hunger and despair, pastors have the opportunity to bring Christ’s Gospel coupled with mercy and compassion to a hurting world. This essay will address these issues by laying a foundation for mercy work, addressing specific issues that come from tragedy and by giving pastors the tools they need in order to provide pastoral care in times of tragedy.

New Testament Illustrations of Care for Body and Soul

Christian mercy work was neither an invention of the Early Church nor an invention of the Lutheran Reformation. Mercy work originated in the New Testament. Mercy was especially modeled in the life of Christ. Jesus’ incarnation to suffer alongside all of humanity exemplified mercy and compassion. In His earthly ministry Jesus was constantly concerned about broken humanity’s body and soul. Throughout Jesus’ Galilean ministry, he walked alongside the people preaching the Gospel and healing the sick. Harrison emphasizes Jesus’ compassion, stating, “Mercy makes something happen. For Jesus *splanchnizomai*, the verb form of *splanchnon*, is always ‘compassion giving birth to action.’”¹ Jesus’ compassion for His people was an example to all Christians of a gut-wrenching concern that drove Him to take action and help those whom He encountered in need. A perfect example of this is when Christ fed the 4,000 (Mark 8:1–9). Because the crowd had been so enamored and engrossed with Jesus’ teaching, they brought nothing to eat; but in His compassion, Christ met their physical needs as He had their spiritual needs. “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way” (Mark 8:2–3). So what did Christ do? Did He continue to preach to them? No. He met their physical needs by providing for them enough food that, “they ate and were satisfied” (Mark 8:8).

Saint Paul’s ministry also serves as an example of caring for people in every need and bearing the burdens of others (Gal. 6:2). Paul provides a model for congregational compassion for its members and the unchurched community around them. Paul encouraged the Galatians, “Let us not grow weary of doing good . . . So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9–10). Paul not only exhorts others to give and serve; he spent years of his life gathering funds in Macedonia and Corinth for the poor in Jerusalem, and then delivering that aid to help them during their crisis. Mark Seifrid explains that Paul regards the collection for Jerusalem “not merely as service to relieve need (although it does do precisely that) but, more fundamentally, to bring about common thanksgiving to God and interchange among the churches.”² Paul also commends the Macedonians “for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth and generosity on their part” (2 Cor 8:2). He points to them as an example of Christian generosity, love and charity for those in the midst of severe persecution and tragedy.

The Epistle of James also instructs Christians how to treat one another. James 2:8 exhorts, “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.” James thus sums up the Old Testament law into a phrase of love toward one’s neighbor. If one is to be a Christian and bear Christ’s name, he must be Christ-like in his love for others.

In one of the most controversial passages of Scripture, James writes, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in

¹ Matthew C. Harrison. *Christ Have Mercy: How to Put Your Faith in Action* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 41.

² Mark A. Seifrid. *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 317.

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? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:14–17). David Scaer explains that these verses address the very practical problem that the "deference to the rich and the criminal ignoring of the poor contradicted God's generous attitude to all men in Christ."³ It is not possible to be Christ-like and intentionally ignore the destitute, especially if they are in the family of faith. Although helping the poor and destitute does not gain one salvation, charity and love are fruits of the Christian life and the natural outgrowth of being a follower of Christ (Eph. 2:10).

The Church's History of Ministry to the Needy

Christian care for humanity in crisis occurred from the very first days after the ascension of Christ and during the apostolic era. The Church grew significantly when the unbelieving community witnessed Christian love in action as the Gospel was proclaimed and churches planted. Historian Adolf Von Harnack explains that, when the good works of the Christians were made public, "people glorified the Christians' God, and, convinced by the very facts, confessed the Christians alone were truly pious and religious."⁴ In both the Early Church and during the Reformation, Christians took care of the poor, slaves, prisoners, and those affected by the plague.

Generous aid and care for the poor was a common theme in the Early Church Fathers such as Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Augustine. In fact some Church Fathers, exemplified by Cyprian, emphasized charity to the point that they viewed it as an essential part of the Christian faith, "Cyprian develops alms into a formal means of grace ... representing alms as a spectacle which the Christian offers to God."⁵ Individual Christians and the Church corporately distributed charity. In A.D. 250 the church in Rome alone paid for 100 clergy and 1,500 additional people who were in need.⁶

The Early Church used deacons, deaconesses and widows to oversee the work of aiding the sick, disabled and poor. Before modern medicine, severe illness was much more prevalent and people lived with both excruciating pain and debilitating health. The Church was aware of their community's needs, as Tertullian said, "True charity, disburses more money in the streets than your religion in temples."⁷ Hence, Christian sacrificial giving extended to both the Church, to take care of the Christian poor, and to the unchurched living in tragic situations.

Another area of concern for the Early Church Fathers was the treatment of the working poor. Slavery was common, and many of the Roman slaves were indentured servants and prisoners of war. John Nordling, in his Philemon commentary, explains that the treatment and quality of life for slaves varied from being treated as family by some slave owners to repeated beatings by others.⁸ Harnack documents five areas where Christians influenced the secular culture toward a more compassionate treatment of slaves.

1. Slaves who converted to Christianity were considered full brothers and sisters in the faith.
2. Slaves were allowed to have membership in the highest offices of the church as clergy and bishops.
3. In a moral sense, Christians taught that female slaves should be treated the same as free females and were not to be treated as sexual objects to be exploited. Sexual abuse of females was not allowed or permitted by the church.
4. Masters and mistresses were strictly charged to treat their slaves humanely and slaves were taught to respect them.
5. Christians would often buy the freedom of Christian slaves, especially those enslaved by abusive masters.⁹

Life in the Early Church era was harsh; there were no substantial government social welfare nets to help the sick, dying and destitute. However, the Church rose up to aid the ill, nurture the dying and to sustain the disabled. Deacons and deaconesses oversaw the mercy work to these people and the widows were charged with prayers for

³ David P. Scaer. *James the Apostle of Faith: A Primary Christological Epistle for the Persecuted Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), 89.

⁴ Ross Edward Johnson. *Mercy in Action: Essays on Mercy, Human Care and Disaster Response* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2015), 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76. Although Cyprian was correct in emphasizing charity and its benefits, charity is not viewed as a sacrament in the traditional sense. Article XIII:4 of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession says, "Baptism, the Lord's Supper and absolution (which is a sacrament of Repentance) are truly Sacraments."

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸ See John G. Nordling. *Philemon*. Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004).

⁹ Johnson, 85–87.

the poor. During the first few centuries of the Early Church there were very few large church buildings. Church structures were rather humble and the majority of the tithes and offerings were designated as poor-funds.¹⁰ The Early Church focused on aiding both Christians and non-Christians. The primary use of the congregation's offering was distributed to the Christian poor, sick or disabled. However, Christians also generously gave to the non-Christian poor in the streets.¹¹

Such mercy work was not confined to the Early Church. In the late 1590s, Germany and many parts of Europe were struck by the plague. Some estimates indicate that as much as one-third of the total European population died. In 1597 the plague decimated a German town named Unna. In the month of July alone, Lutheran Pastor Philipp Nicolai buried 300 congregation members, and over 1,000 people died.¹² Critical to Lutheran spiritual care was to minister to the sick and dying, despite the possibility of clergy dying from infection.¹³ In the midst of this devastating catastrophe, Pastor Nicolai found his comfort in the cross, Scripture, the Divine Service and hymnody. During the worst parts of the plague Pastor Nicolai wrote the book *Freudenspiegel (Mirror of Joy of Eternal Life)*. He also wrote what would later be known as the queen and king of the Lutheran chorales, "Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying" and, "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright."¹⁴ With the introduction of congregational singing during the Lutheran Reformation, hymnody became one of the primary ways for Christians to articulate the joys of the cross and the hope of heaven to come, even in the direst of circumstances.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has a long tradition of congregational mercy work and human care from its very inception. There is little question that C.F.W. Walther, the first president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, was a staunch defender of the office of the holy ministry, one who held that the primary work of the pastor is to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments. However, the boundaries of pastoral work are not confined to preaching and consecrating. Walther wrote, "Although a preacher above all has concern for the spiritual needs of the members of his congregation, concern for the physical well-being, particularly the needs of the poor, the sick, widows, orphans, the infirm, the destitute, the aged, etc., are within the scope of the duties of his office."¹⁵ Hence, pastors who encourage their congregations to show mercy to their members and their communities in times of tragedy are well within their role as pastor.

John Frederick Buenger, a young pastoral candidate, traveled with Walther from Saxony, Germany, and settled in Missouri. Pastor Buenger, who initially served as a parish pastor, experienced enormous personal tragedies including the death of his wife and five children.¹⁶ Working closely with Walther, Buenger oversaw the formation of Lutheran hospitals in St. Louis and a large orphanage in the nearby city of Des Peres. F. Dean Lueking explains, "John Frederick Buenger's 35 years of pastoral ministry ... left a profound influence upon the benevolence ministry of the young Synod. His work in founding the Lutheran Hospital and the Lutheran Orphanage set a pattern in theory and practice of social ministry that continued long after his death."¹⁷

During the first 100 years of the LCMS's history, mercy ministry exploded. "By 1928 there were 72 Lutheran hospitals, orphanages, child welfare societies, homes for the aged and institution missions."¹⁸ In 1950, the Board of Social Welfare was established to help organize the 2,500 people who were serving in Lutheran Social Ministries to approximately 100,000 people annually.¹⁹ By the 1960s each district of the LCMS had a board or commission for social welfare and 70 percent of the LCMS congregations had mercy committees.²⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., 81.

¹¹ Ibid., 81.

¹² Ibid., 135–36.

¹³ For further reading on pastoral care in times of the plague, consider reading Martin Luther. "Whether One May Flee from the Deadly Plague" in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 43, Devotional Writings. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968).

¹⁴ Ibid., 137.

¹⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹⁶ F. Dean Lueking. *A Century of Caring: The Welfare Ministry Among Missouri Synod Lutherans 1868–1968* (St. Louis: Board of Social Ministry The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968), 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹ Ibid., 70.

²⁰ Ibid., 74.

If the fledgling renaissance of mercy work in Lutheran churches is to continue, faithful pastors are well-positioned to foster works of charity while preventing a departure into a graceless social gospel. With instruments at their disposal every day, they are prepared to provide spiritual care even to those who suffer horrific disasters.

Helping Christians to Understand God's Love: Answering the Why Question

Contrary to what popular culture says, people are not spiritually good or deserving of God's favor in and of themselves. The Bible consistently teaches that we are sinners even after conversion (Romans 7). The Bible says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). We confess in the Divine Service that we justly deserve God's "present and eternal punishment."²¹

There will always be aspects of our all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving God that humans will never understand. Unfortunately, in times of trouble, humans assume the worst of God and believe that He doesn't care. People believe they have the right to demand that God explain His actions to us. Instead, we should trust in His love even if we don't understand what is happening to us or around us. It is because of God's love that He is at work redeeming and saving people from themselves. This love is clearly evident in God sending his Son to die on the cross to pay for our sin so that one day all those who die in the one true Christian faith will be rescued from this world of tragedy and live in the perfection of Heaven.

In times of tragedy, instead of trying to speculate about God's nature or demanding God to do our will, the proper response is repentance. In Luke 13 Pilate slaughters the pious. It was an evil action against undeserving people. In response, Jesus told the people to repent: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). He did not justify the event, explain God's nature or discuss why evil happens. He spoke instead of repentance. Repentance is humbling and moves one from being self-centered to trusting in God's goodness and mercy. It turns a sinner from pride to reliance on the Almighty and all-loving God who does not always give explanations except "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14) and "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Is. 55:8) or as St. Paul explains, "Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (Rom. 9:20).

Lutheran pastoral care can help explain to others why suffering and tragedy happens. Suffering and tragedy are a result of sin and the fall. God explicitly warned Adam and Eve not to disobey His law. However, they chose to disobey God. Sin and brokenness entered the world. As soon as humanity fell into sin, our loving God promised redemption (Gen. 3:15). From the time of the fall until the final day of this world there will be tragedy, suffering and sin. However, God is actively rescuing this world from sin, death and the devil in ways that are not always realized.

As we offer pastoral care to those hurting and confused, it is always best to focus on having faith in what is revealed to us about God; that He loves us, that He died for all of humanity and that He continually rescues us from brokenness and sin. It is not beneficial to meditate on the hiddenness of God, which will never be understood, which questions God and what He is doing behind the scenes of our lives and this world. He does not promise all the answers. Everything that is necessary to know about God and salvation is clearly revealed in the Scriptures.

It is always important to remind those suffering that when bad is happening, it is not necessarily directly related to a particular sin that they have committed. However, it is always because we live in a sinful and broken world (Genesis 2-3). In this world our bodies betray us and we get sick and die, or others betray us and cause problems and misfortune. Often we go through personal agony because of the sinful choices that we ourselves make (Psalm 51). At times there are spiritual attacks by the devil and his demons who like to harass people and cause misery and misfortune (Job).

When offering spiritual care, it is important to remind people that God often allows amazing things to come out of tragic situations. Joseph's sufferings led to good for many (Gen. 50:15-21), and Job was eventually blessed after his time of tragedy (Job 42:10). However, it is also important to maintain that there is no promise that believers will always directly see or understand the good that comes out of particular trials and tribulations. In times of tragedy it is important to trust in God's nature: that He is a loving and caring heavenly Father who is watching over His people. He is at work with mercy. God's mercy revealed to humanity is clearest in the person of Jesus Christ, the constant assurance that we are reconciled to our Heavenly Father and that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God which is found in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39).

²¹ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 184.

Shepherding to the Cross: The Theology of the Cross

Shepherding with the theology of the cross ensures that the ministry provided is Christocentric. When a pastor's focus is on the cross, it allows Christ to increase and the person to decrease (John 3:30). Times of tragedy break down the false walls of pride that people build up. Many times people falsely comfort themselves with their own achievements, intelligence and self-sufficiency. Being diagnosed with terminal cancer, having an uninsured house flood or the sudden loss of a loved one is shocking and humbling: it is a reminder of what Job learned, that "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). When this world strips away all that this life has to offer, the Christian is left with two choices: he can struggle alone or he can turn to his Lord and Savior as his refuge in the midst of this life's storms.

Martin Luther famously explained, "A theologian of the cross says what a thing is, whereas a theologian of glory calls the bad good and the good bad."²² In times of tragedy a faithful pastor has a clear opportunity to explain sin and its consequences to people who have denied the sting of sin and death. Pastors proclaim the tragedy of the broken reality in which we live. The pastor can then guide his listener into the only true comfort, namely Christ and the resurrection. Theologians of glory will try to candy-coat the sting of sin with shallow spirituality like, "if you just have enough faith, this will turn out ok." A theologian of the cross says, "I can see how difficult this is. This is completely normal. But, take hope, Christ suffers with you. He knows the pain that you are going through," and he continues to point the person to Christ.

Theologians of glory seek to affirm their members with their own optimism and positivity; but despite the last few decades of mega-churches' practical theology of optimism and self-worth, the bigger issue is a deteriorating sense of self-worth. Christian self-worth is only found in what Jesus did on the cross. Popular Neo-Evangelical Christian books are written about achieving your best potential or about how to live victoriously. But a theologian of the cross points forward to the resurrection, heaven and the best life to come. Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19–20).

A theologian of the cross brings comfort by reminding the person how compassionate Jesus was in his suffering in this world — compassionate for sinful humanity. Jesus was lied about, lied to, betrayed, hungry, beaten and killed so that He could suffer in our stead — and so that we could be forgiven. Pastors can lead those suffering to take comfort in the fact that they live in the shadow of Jesus' cross, and any goodness that they have comes from a righteousness that has been imputed to them from God. They can take comfort that they are God's perfect children because Christ took all of their sin and shame and then God gave them all of Christ's perfection, active obedience and righteousness.

The theology of the cross can be understood by someone who has lost everything due to tragedy, because tragedy breaks a sinner from self-reliance. A theologian of glory resists confession of sin but the theologian of the cross confesses, "I am a poor miserable sinner." The Lutheran confession of sin is devoid of positive thinking, wisdom, optimism or personal strength. The boasting of the theologian of the cross is only found in his status as a new creation in Christ. Saint Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

When Christians feel as if they are going "through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4), they have a promise that the troubles of this world are only temporary.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:20–22).

For the one that lives outside of the one true Christian faith, this life's sorrows are his best life. His future will be utter destruction. But for the one who believes in Christ, this world will not compare to what God has prepared for him in the future (Rom. 8:18). Despite the catastrophes suffered in this world, the greatest tragedy that could happen is still to die outside of the one true Christian faith. It is thus ideal that congregational mercy be connected to the Gospel message whenever possible so that spiritual healing can happen while earthly needs are being met.

²² Gerhard O. Forde. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), x.

Pastoral Visitation in Times of Crisis: Being Present in the Community

Christ's presence after His resurrection demonstrates the power He has to console and comfort the needy. Christ's powerful presence is the paradigm for our ministry of mercy, which can dispel the darkness of fear and uncertainty of the future (John 20:19–20). It was the power of Christ's presence that moved His disciples from the tragedy of death to the triumph of life. That same power is realized today in the ministry of the Church through those who stand in His stead to transcend the critical events that affect people's lives. Our Lutheran response is a clear testimony of the Gospel, not just in deed, but also in word — the word of Christ's forgiveness and eternal love.²³

The call and vocation of the pastor is to bring peace through God's Word to the brokenhearted. God's peace is more than a passing allusion to Jesus or His love. Rather pastoral comfort is given when the pastor takes time to comfort the disheartened in the brokenness of this life (sin) and share God's mercy through His Son (Gospel), the Christian's ultimate hope (heaven). Pastoral comfort can happen in the pastor's office or off the church property. However, the model of ministry that is shown to us through Christ is one of a shepherd that is out and about walking among his people (Matt. 4:18).

When the pastor is visiting his members and people in the community, he can help them as they are trying to survive the effects of a disaster. In the confusion of the world's tragedies, one's mind or even friends can give horrible advice that often leads to spiritual disillusionment.

Additionally, sometimes before a tragedy strikes, genuine Christians hold on to pop-psychology, false beliefs and false promises about God and His nature. Through patience, visitation, kindness and teaching, faithful pastors have the opportunity to comfort and correct God's people, who are being led astray by the tragedies of the world, with His Word.

The Role of Worship as Comfort

One of the simplest and most eloquent explanations of Christian worship was written by Norman Nagel in the preface of the hymnal, *Lutheran Worship*, "Our Lord speaks and we listen ... The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs."²⁴ In the Divine Service, God comes to man and blesses him with His gifts through the pastor who is called to be in the stead of Christ. In the midst of tragic events, broken humanity needs God's blessing more than ever. Nowhere are people closer to the presence of God than when they are in the Divine Service where Christ is bodily present with a special promise to bless and forgive.

Tragic events — including the death of a loved one, a grave medical diagnosis or a catastrophic natural disaster — peel back the façade that covers this broken world. Tragedy allows people to see the destructiveness of a fallen world and sin's consequences. Yet, despite brokenness, Christ invites His people, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). In the Divine Service, God comes to man and blesses him so that humanity can have spiritual rest in Him. As the service begins with a confession of sin, people understand their need for forgiveness and then receive grace of God. The pastor, who stands in the stead of Christ and in front of His sheep, is a powerful comfort and reminder of God's presence in the midst of the storms of this world. There is nothing sweeter than to hear the love, grace and mercy of God spoken into one's ears. The absolution is the declaration of God's forgiveness, a gift of God's peace and a reminder that He is with His people despite the catastrophe they may be experiencing.

After the Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, which killed and injured thousands, American church attendance swelled for a few months. People flocked to hear God's Word preached to them. In times of tragedy, pastors are called to clearly preach the Law, even if death and destruction may be all around them, even if they are surrounded by caskets. In a crisis, the laity need to understand the cause of the brokenness of this world from God's perspective; nothing should be taken for granted. If the hearers do not understand the spiritual significance and the causes of sin and destruction, they will have a weakened sense of the comfort that the Gospel gives and they will place little hope in the resurrection.

Nowhere on earth are we closer to God than when we stand or kneel before the altar and receive the body and blood of Christ given for the ongoing forgiveness of our sins. When Christians receive the body and blood of Christ, they

²³ Part of this section can be found in: Ross Edward Johnson and Michael W. Meyer, editors. *Mercy in Action: A Guide for Pastors in the Midst of Disaster* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2014), 18.

²⁴ *Lutheran Worship*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 6.

are connected to Christ (1 Cor. 10:16–17). They are connected to Him *despite* the chaos of this world. Communion is a powerful comfort in a world that provides very little hope or consolation. The Lord's Supper is where God is actively giving grace, mercy and forgiveness; and the parishioner is passively receiving blessing, strength, forgiveness and encouragement from God Himself.

Through Lutheran hymnody members sing theologically rich songs that bring hope and consolation. Since these hymns are based on scriptural truths they bring spiritual comfort. Hymnody is a beautiful and powerful way to express deep scriptural truths in a memorable way to Christians of all ages. It allows Christians to rejoice after receiving the body and blood of Christ with a song of praise; and can help remind them of scriptural truth such as, "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."²⁵

At the close of the Divine Service, the entire congregation is reminded once more that they are blessed and at peace with God. The last words that the congregation hears are pure grace, "The Lord bless thee and keep thee, the Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace."²⁶ Once again the believer is a passive recipient and the Lord is the One who blesses and proclaims His love. The Christian simply receives and responds, "Amen." The Lutheran worship service allows the believer to be comforted in the confidence that he is loved by his Lord despite his own sin and despite what is happening in his life around him.

Conclusion

In a world full of tragedy, disasters, suffering and pain, Lutheran pastors have an arsenal of spiritual weapons to combat the world, the devil and bad theology. Pastors have the Bible, the Confessions, the Catechism, the Creeds, hymnody and much more. These instruments are as much for use in times of disaster as on an ordinary Sunday. As people suffer the tragic loss of their home, health, job, family, children or anything else, they can be comforted by pastors who point them to Christ through good and biblical spiritual care. Although a theology of mercy may seem like common sense to many faithful pastors, pastoral care in times of tragedy is often neglected. A theology of mercy in action that takes place in the community is not as prevalent as it was in the life of Christ, in the lives of the apostles or in the era of the Early Church Fathers, yet this is slowly changing. Once again, pastors and congregations are looking into ways that they can serve their community. In times of tragedy, the fragile veil of American self-reliance and optimism is peeled back and a Lutheran pastor is well-equipped to minister with the theology of the cross to the hurting of this world. Only through the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions is he faithfully able to minister to the needs of his flock which takes them to the cross of Christ to be comforted by Him. By being present and active in one's community, the Lutheran congregation and pastor are able to be positioned to help in every need of this body and life (5th and 7th commandments). All the more, they are able to provide spiritual comfort only the Gospel can give.

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²⁵ *The Lutheran Hymnal*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), Hymn 376.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.