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HAVING MERCY ON OUR BROTHERS

by Matthew C. Harrison

How does diaconic love reflect the very being of God?

MY FIRST CALL WAS OUT OF Concordia Theological Seminary in 1991, I believe, and it was to a small Iowa community called Westgate, St. Peter's Lutheran Church. As I was there, I served for about four years, and the church was rather vibrant and active. When I left, we had 440 members in a town of 200 and a lot more milk cows — several thousand of those.

The ministry went well there. It was a strong church and a very tight knit community, but challenges that had plagued urban America were clearly also plaguing rural America, such as methamphetamine. I had members who were involved in meth trade. We had inactive members who were active pot smokers and messing with other drugs. We had an alcoholism epidemic in the community. We had youth alcohol abuse all over the place.

We had single parent households, rural welfare — all these things now plague rural America virtually everywhere.

In the course of my time there, I began to think, you know, I wonder if there isn't something else that we, as a corporate community, as a church, ought to be doing in a community like that. I was nagged by this idea, even as I ended up leaving. I just didn't have my finger on resources to refer to, and theologically, I was struggling with exactly what it might mean for the church. I had been taught rather strongly that the Church is involved in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, and really, being involved in care for the body was somehow the domain of the liberals. My teacher Kurt Marquart, who had some really reserved

views on what the Church ought to be doing in the realm of corporate mercy, who nevertheless embodied it enormously personally. Kurt Marquart, now deceased, was a professor here, and I heard the story that toward the end of his life he actually stopped, as he was want to do, and picked up a hitchhiker, and the hitchhiker proceeded

to rob him at gunpoint and steal his car, then sent him off walking. The next thing I knew Kurt was visiting him in the Fort Wayne jail, and he was convinced the guy might have a future as a seminarian.

Then I was called to Zion Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, to a very unique situation. It was, at the time, the poorest census track in the state of Indiana, and that's pretty poor when you consider Gary over by Chicago. All around Zion — a beautiful gothic structure built in 1893 and an anchor

for the neighborhood for a century — the neighborhood had gone through a number of changes. When I was there, it was mostly a black neighborhood, and within a block and a half of the church, there were 45 vacant, dilapidated buildings. So, I began looking at that problem, and I told my assistant pastor, Paul Kaiser, "Why don't you take care of the shut-ins? I'll do the senior pastor stuff and also take a look at this neighborhood and see if we can't do something about it."

I think, initially, there were several reasons for doing so. One was that the people from the rest of the community don't like to come down to the black section of town. There were a lot of racial tensions in this town. Fort Wayne had been a very Southern town during in the

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Civil War. If you read E.G. Zealor's autobiography — that's the son of Wilhelm Zealor who was the vice president of the Synod in the 1860s and 70s — he talks about an effigy of Lincoln on a parade float being hauled through town with derisive language on it and then being lit on fire and thrown into the river with everybody celebrating. So, this town, like St. Louis, which you have unfortunately seen as of late, has its racial tensions.

So, I felt inspired to do something that would take down barriers from people coming in to go to church at Zion while also looking at the community around the church. I realized that the dilapidation was in largest measure caused by rental properties. In other words, there were many homeowners in the neighborhood who kept up their homes and worked hard to do so, but others who lived outside the community would rent these homes to people who would be allowed to run these homes down to nothing. Finally, windows would be smashed out, and then the homeless or somebody with mental illness would occupy a place. There were homes that I went in that were just 100 yards from Zion that were filled five-feet deep with everything you could collect free at every Goodwill center — clothing and everything else you can imagine, like drug paraphernalia, pornography, etc. A story I have often told is that I went around one house north of the church that was dilapidated, and with the help of a lawyer in town, I bought it. I was just going around buying property right and left, making deals for old houses and vacant lots.

Zion became pretty well known in the community and greatly appreciated in the immediate community. We had many, many different challenges and problems. I was convinced that there had to be some better theological rationale for not only that kind of effort, but for the church as a corporate body taking a stand and an active stance toward people in need and other issues happening in communities. In that particular case, at Zion, I became convinced that the church was a corporation. Every one of our congregations in America is registered with the state, so we can have the proper tax benefits, and we are Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Inc. That means, as a corporation of people, our congregations, indeed our

districts and the body itself, are all corporate citizens of their respective communities. So, if your neighborhood is in atrophy, you will take action in your community. You will if your neighborhood is going to participate actively. If you see some injustice going on in your community, you will, as a citizen of your community who has a responsibility, indeed as a Christian citizen, you will act. You will not be quiet. Just where to act and where not to act, that's always a challenge to discern, and we are criticized sometimes for acting in some places and not acting in others. Fundamentally, as corporate citizens, the church must act in its community.

Where the Church loses sight of this proclamation of the Gospel, it thereby loses the very motivation for diaconic work, the Gospel itself. Thus, the Church must not speak when it *may* do so; the Church must speak only when it *must* do so — easier said than done.

It was only after leaving Fort Wayne that I began to think about some kind of theological rationale for what became a catchword for the theological rationale for mercy. I was called to St. Louis to be the executive for the Missouri Synod's LCMS World Relief and Human Care departments. That encompassed disaster and the whole realm of mercy activities, including relationships with social ministry agencies. There is a huge network of Lutheran agencies in the United States. It's an \$8–10 billion business, corporately together with the ELCA and the Missouri Synod Institutions. They receive something like 8 billion dollars in federal funding and state funding. It is an enormous network.

I remember when I got the call to St. Louis, I began to look at the theological issues involved, and working with the Board for Human Care, I suggested that we try to lay out some kind of theological rationale for mercy. As I began to study the issue more and more, I realized that right within my own tradition there was a lot of "ammo." I saw parts of text and older text that I had never noticed before. I went on a journey through Paul's collection for Jerusalem and became convinced that the collection from Jerusalem drives Paul's entire third missionary journey. He is consumed with this for almost a decade. He ends up taking money to Jerusalem to distribute to the poor as a gift from the Gentile churches. It's kind of an eschatological realization of the kingdom in some fashion, as he actually goes to Jerusalem with the money to deliver the gifts, and he ends up getting in trouble because he did so — imprisoned, shipped off to Rome and finally

beheaded. All the words we use for stewardship and giving money — God loves a cheerful giver; the gift is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what a person does; 1 Corinthians 8-9, where Paul is urging the Corinthian Christians who are cosmopolitan and rather wealthy to give money — I discovered in Paul's words for money that they represent aid to Christians. Paul calls that money a *liturgia*. He calls it a liturgy, a public service. He also calls it a *diakonia*, a service, a ministry. He calls it a *koinonia*, a fellowship, a partaking. He even calls it a *charis*, a grace. So, all of a sudden, I realize St. Paul is using the most powerful words in the New Testament to talk about aid to the needy. Then I began to think, "Well, gee, this has really been missing among us. Why, why have we nothing to say on this?"

Then, other sudden classic texts became to pop out, like Walther's *Pastoral Theology*. Here, Walther says the official duties of the pastoral office are to care also for the poor, the weak, the needy and the orphaned. The congregation is even obligated to ensure that the impoverished, if they don't have enough money for a funeral, are buried properly. Why had all this slipped away from so many of our congregations, indeed our whole Church? There are many other such texts. Luther says in the 1519 Sermon on the Sacrament, that at the Sacrament, you come to the altar, you kneel and you lay your burdens upon Christ and the gathered community. When you leave the altar, you take up the burdens of the others at that same altar.

If you look at Dr. Walther's famous *The Proper Form of the Christian Congregation* — the *Die Rechte Gestalt* it is called — there are page after page of the congregation and the pastor's responsibility to see that people in need are cared for. I think in the wake of the rise of the social, the welfare state in America since World War II, the realm of care of people shifted from local communities, churches especially, really and the rise of the cost of health care, those issues shifted largely to the government. Churchly institutions, one after another, became intensely secularized until they were either sold, or in many cases, separated from the churches altogether.

So, we began working with the Board for Human Care to have a theological rationale for what resulted in a theology for mercy. It was my conviction that pastors, especially many younger pastors, would not be averse to the church being active in mercy, if in fact there was a decent attempt at a theological basis. I think that proved to be correct.

Diaconic love has its source in the Holy Trinity. The Son is begotten of The Father from eternity. The Holy Spirit proceeds from The Father and The Son. Such begetting and procession are trinitarian acts of love, expressing the commonality of God, as in Luke 6:36: "Be ye merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful." Diaconic love reflects the very being of God. If you're going to say, "Forget it. I don't have any responsibility toward my neighbor," you are not breaking the law only, you are denying who God is, essentially. Diaconic love is born of the incarnation and humiliation of Christ. In Christ, the eternal God became man. Such identity occurred that Christ might have mercy upon His brothers — like them in every way, except sin. Christian service of the neighbor finds its source, motivation, and example in Christ incarnate, redeeming, atoning, active love. Christ is born for us, becomes incarnate for us, and Luther says, "We, as it were, become incarnate for our neighbor in need."

God would have all come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). A biblically and confessionally faithful theology of mercy clearly confesses that the Father has decreed from eternity that whomever He would save, He would save through Christ, as Christ Himself says, "No one comes to The Father except through me" (John 14:6), and again, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

What is the essence of being a Lutheran Christian in mercy? Christ! What does Christ do? He speaks Law and Gospel. He speaks consolation. He speaks His Word. He makes promises, and He acts in love. What do we do as Christians? We speak. We speak of Christ. We can't help but speak of Christ. The fundamental truth of the Bible that there is no salvation outside faith in Christ and His merits animate the Church's work for those in need. If this is not so, such work becomes merely secular and may be performed by any entity in society.

The Gospel gives spring forgiveness and begets merciful living. Lives that receive mercy and grace cannot but be lovingly merciful toward the neighbor. The merciful washing of Baptism in Romans 6 produces the merciful living in Rom. 7:4-6. I noticed when Paul taught about the Sacraments or the Gospel, the consequence was also always a life of mercy and service. In absolution, the merciful Word of the Gospel begets merciful speaking and living.

Repentance ought to produce good fruits, the greatest possible generosity to the poor (Apology 12, 174). When

we refuse to address the needs within the community as people of God and particularly as the Church of God, we are not merely breaking the Law, but we are also denying the Sacraments. We are denying what we are made in Baptism. We're denying what Christ's body and blood is for us. Christ's mandate and example of love for the whole person remains our supreme example for life in this world and for care of the needy body and soul.

The Lutheran Confessions explicitly and repeatedly state that the work of diaconic love (charity, works of love) is an assumed reality in the Church's corporate life (see Treatise 80–82, Apology 4 and Apology 7). Moreover, the Smalcald Articles explicitly state that works of love are along with, doctrine, faith, Sacraments and prayer, areas that the Church and its bishops are joined in unity. This scene does not dominate our confessions. There is no doubt about that, but it certainly is there.

The call to mercy is particularly addressed to Christians as a corporate community, church, whether local or synod, even nation or international. Within these communities, individuals serve in diaconic vocations, pastoral concern for the needy, chaplain, spiritual care, deacon, deaconess parish nurse, medical disciplines, disaster care and a host of administrative and managerial vocations. These diaconic vocations are flexible in form and determined by need. Within an ecclesial setting, their common goal is the integration of proclamation of the Gospel, faith, worship and care for those in need. The range of the legitimate disciplines of human care may be used in the Church's diaconic life to the extent that such discipline tools do not contradict the Gospel and the doctrine of Holy Scripture.

So, the Apology says, "Christ's kingdom is spiritual." At the same time, it permits us to make outward use of legitimate political ordinances of whatever nation in which we live, just as it permits us to make use of medicine or architecture or food, drink or air. The Church's work of mercy extends beyond its own borders. In the New and Old Testaments, we see a priority of concern for those within the Orthodox fellowship of faith, but add, "Do good also to those outside the kingdom of God, especially to those inside, but also to those outside the house of God."

This is a criticism we received early on. About 10 or 11 years ago, there was a small tornado that hit south of St. Louis, and it hit a small community there, and we have a church there. The high school was leveled. There were no deaths, but there was a lot of loss and a lot of people

adversely affected. Up until this time, the only thing the Missouri Synod had done for disaster for congregations was to work through Lutheran Disaster Response and send dollars for disbursement among social ministry organizations. The social ministry organizations act as government partners and also do ongoing care for people, case management and get people back on their feet over time. We had not addressed our own congregations in any significant way, our own immediate need. In fact, the rules of Lutheran Disaster Response precluded assisting congregations in anything, any damage to churches, or anything like that.

Out of this came a so-called Congregation Model of Disaster Response, and we discovered that what happened was when you go to help a family, you call the family first, and you check with the pastor. Then we go, and our disaster responders then say, "Okay, here is what we are going to do. We have some people here that are going to take care of your wife, and we got you some interim housing taken care of, and now we're going to make sure that you come along. Here, we are going to visit your congregation elders first. We will pull them together and start developing a plan. Because the whole community will respond, it will be important for you to be in the middle of that as part of your community to serve. There is a probably a niche for you to serve, and I think your niche might well be a staging ground for immediate repairs on something. We can house the volunteers in a large part of your property, if we bring in the proper equipment. By the way, we have a mobile food unit that we funded, and we can bring that down and make sure we have it all set up. And we'll start cooking meals for all the volunteers that are coming in." So you see, what is initial concern for our own is a concern also to increase their local capacity immediately and care for those well beyond their own borders.

Next the Church will cooperate with others in meeting human need. "Cooperation in externals" has long been an expression describing the Church's legitimate ability to cooperate with other Christians, whether churches, societies, Lutheran or Christians, or not in meeting some human need. To cooperate in externals means to work toward common goals and endeavors which do not necessitate, require or necessarily imply church fellowship or involve joint proclamation of the Gospel in administration of the Sacraments. Such cooperative endeavors are entered upon often for practical reasons, lack of critical resources for instance, but such endeavors

are also often an expression of the belief that when entered to with other Christian entities of the catholicity of the Church. You know, the Formula of Concord very carefully distinguishes between hard-necked false teachers and Christians who find themselves in denominations other than Lutheran, and it is very charitable to them. As well as an expression of love for fellow Christians, through such endeavors the LCMS will often have opportunities to insist on theological integrity and the truth of God's word and everyone make a positive contribution to activities.

So then, the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms grants broad freedom for the Church to engage and be active in its community. The Church has a role in its community, local, national and international, by virtue of the fact that the congregations in national churches are actually corporate citizens of their respected communities. As such, congregations, churches and synods as a whole engage the community as corporate citizens of God's left hand kingdom, working toward worthy civic goals, good citizenship, just laws in society, protection of the weak, housing, etc. Legitimate civil ordinances are good creations of God and divine ordinances in which a Christian may safely take part. As such, a corporate citizen, the church has civic and political capital. In addition to engaging its members to be responsible citizens, the Church may from time to time speak with a collective voice on issues of great significance to society, particularly where the basic value of human life is diminished.

Public redress, which is made through the office of the judge is not forbidden, but is commanded and is a work of God, according to Paul in Romans 13. Public redress includes judicial decisions. Luther, in his writing on temple authority, to what extent it should be obeyed, says that Christians should not take recourse against government in any way, shape or form. Fortunately, the Confessions did not agree with Luther here and said that Christians indeed may make use of legitimate civil ordinances like juries and trials and judges. There have been times of necessity, and so we have acted on numerous religious freedom cases. The Missouri Synod files briefs for numerous cases around the country which are from time to time referenced by U.S. Supreme Court judges in their opinions. We have also famously been involved very directly in religious freedom cases, and those cases will continue be upon us with intensity.

There have been times in the life of the Church when it was the sole guardian and provider for the needy. In our

day, the rise of the modern welfare state has shifted that monetary responsibility in large measure to the civic, civil realm. There is a large intersection of civil and churchly endeavor at just this point. Thus, the Church's response to these issues is always mutating and nuanced. In these matters, the church must spend its capital wisely and sparingly. They must avoid both quietism and political activism. The former shuns the ethical demand of love for the neighbor, ignoring for instance the ethical urgency of the Old Testament Minor Prophets. The latter may obscure the Church's fundamental and perceptual task as bearer of the Word to sinners in need of Christ. Where the Church loses sight of this proclamation of the Gospel, it thereby loses the very motivation for diaconic work, the Gospel itself. Thus, the Church must not speak when it may do so; the Church must speak only when it must do so — easier said than done.

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