

## "WHAT IS LUTHERAN AGED CARE?" – some brief considerations (December 2014)

(Caveats:

- These are merely introductory comments, to which further referencing is deserved but for brevity's sake are not given here.
- Many other aspects of theology should be focussed on too but for brevity's sake I have not included much comment – some of these other aspects are, eg, the orders of creation, Law and Gospel, our teaching on Vocation/s and on the Stations in which God places us in life.
- In what is written below re a Lutheran distinctive, it should be acknowledged that many Christians of other denominations might well resonate with this distinctive – even though their denomination's official writings present something different
- For simplicity's sake, my reference to "aged care" relates not immediately to congregational settings but to those being cared for in aged care facilities or retirement villages. [*The general motivations/truths expressed herein certainly apply to responding to old members in congregational situations*]
- Lastly here, these thoughts are written in some haste; thus my expressions may not immediately be clear)

Upon hearing this question – *What is Lutheran aged care?* – one might anticipate that there is something new or amazing or unique to be heard as compared with what is seen or heard from other churches and religions about how they approach aged care.

It is important to note up front that, in practice, Lutheran aged care looks precisely like every other church involved in aged care – in terms of, eg, general care of and concern for residents, meeting their medical and social needs, organizing menus, offering stimulation through worship and conversation, and more, plus in the need to rightly motivate and train staff, and fulfil government regulations and expectations. There are a myriad of every-day tasks to be fulfilled.

As we Lutherans observe other churches or people of good will (even should they be atheists, eg) undertaking and performing many good things for residents, we are grateful to God for such blessing, and praise them for all that they do – their good works fulfil the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Commandment to Love one's neighbour (Matthew 22), and something our good Lord says: (Matthew 25:40) 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' Luther used the description, *larvae Dei* ('masks of God'), and being 'a little Christ', as ways to indicate that such good works are God's presence in the world, instruments of Him expressing His eternal love, the love that fiercely fights for people every nano-second of life in this world *before the night comes and no one can change things* (John 9:4).

The difference (that is to be apparent) in Lutheran aged care from that provided by other churches or agencies of good will rests in a distinction at the foundational level, which in practice acts as a clarifying motivator.

This Lutheran distinctive can be expressed in the sentence: God calls us to be faithful, not successful.

This does not mean that a whole lot of good works are not done / that Lutherans are not successful, but it is a statement indicating that such good works are not the goal or chief motivating factor.

The whole Lutheran Reformation centred on this principle: God calls us to be faithful, not successful. The Catholic church of Luther's day openly taught that entry to heaven required that a person grow in the volume of holiness (interpreted as one's personal goodness) before dying – crassly-put, the aim was to be able to impress God such that He opened the proverbial pearly gates to the good person. Overall, Calvin's (Reformed) theological emphasis on holiness / obedience tended to promote the same thing, just as did the view of the Enthusiasts regarding doing good and feeling close to God. Simply-put, such theology influences one toward success-orientation, having to see the results, to an achieving, especially of eternal happiness. For Lutherans, the focus in understanding holiness surely includes doing all manner of good BUT from the new God-given state of being, the state of God reconciling Himself to us and, so, us being reconciled to Him – this is not a goal-driven life but rather, simply, new life lived.

In aged care terms, a success-orientation of theology translates out to having to demonstrably achieve government expectations and to make people/residents happy – and in religious terms, seeking/getting God's approval. In this scenario people are like Little Jack Horner with his conclusion "What a good boy am I!"

For Lutherans, the call to be faithful means the concern is never for success as a goal/a seen end result. At best, good works and their 'success' is only just a natural fruit of simply and always being faithful toward God and others – see, eg, all of 1 John 4; NB especially v19 "We love, because He first loved us".

Key to being faithful is Christ's work. He did not come to make our goodness better/good enough to pass muster with holy God. Rather, Christ's atoning, purifying work for us returns to us the innocence before God lost for us through Adam and Eve's rebellion near the beginning – death only has a right to keep the guilty; Christ rose from the dead not by His goodness but because He was in Himself innocent. Another way to express this is by St Paul, who wrote/taught (Galatians 5:1, 13): 'For freedom [before holy God and in the world] Christ has set us free.'

Freedom is about being fear-less, without fear, not driven from or by fear (1 John 4:18). Christ's gifted freedom to us is about acknowledging / living life knowing that Christ's innocence covers us – cf Romans 8:1 "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". Thus, we are always safe in, with and under God. He is always looking out for us, and has our eternal bliss (where all is set to rights) all sorted for us – thus the early words of John 14 and Revelation 21 are a fountain for us and inspire us. If God is looking out for us, we need not look to or out for ourselves [that's a confidence in which we pray the Lord's Prayer too].

This is why we rejoice especially in the on-going effect and life of Baptism, where God re-created us as His own beloved ones. The fruit of this divine re-creation of us is seen in such things as acts of unconditional love, joy with others, self-sacrifice, self-denial, going the extra mile (Matthew 5), being humble, counting others better than ourselves [putting others easily before ourselves] (Philippians 2), eager to be servants of the Most High, even among enemies (Luke 6). [Much more from the Bible could be added here, eg, re integrity, loyalty, protection, resisting / being separate from evil]

The 'production' of love ... for love produces love ... is never motivated by having to see results; perhaps the Lord will grant glimpses – for encouragement – but many times He won't, to avoid the damning dangers of misplaced pride. We children of God simply set about being faithful in bringing God and His heavenly blessings to others for their (we pray) present and eternal benefit, for them to see and love God for Himself rather than what He can give.

So, we woo people as best we can into love of the Bridegroom, while we avoid manipulating / managing people to any end. We do not have as an aim that we must make people happy – rather, we bring Heaven's rule and heart and the blessings of the heavenly realm to people, even those who tell us 'where to go.' We are privileged by the Lord of all to bring His world-changing and life-transforming peace and strength and valuing and help to others who are caught up in deathliness and doom.

Just here is the place for God's Law and Gospel to go to work – or, to use them in verb-form, where part of genuine love and care for others involves law-ing people, facing people in their conscience with their sin and its guilt and despair before holy God, and then gosselling them with God's calming, resurrecting forgiveness. [Much more could be said here, especially with regard to pastoral care of souls, but let this suffice for now]. Again, this is not manipulation but a life-giving unshackling of hearts to beat in time with God's. I should add, though, that just here is the home of people finding us to be trustworthy and 'real'.

In staff terms, we gladly encourage them into never seeing / treating residents as a 'job' to be managed but as people in particular circumstances and conditions of need – just so, residents are not to be considered 'problems' but people with problems – for whom staff / we all have a role in locating [possible] solutions to their problems; at the least, even in our times of powerlessness, we will be God's presence with residents as the good Lord begins His calling them from this life. Staff will need reminding – even by speaking to their consciences – that residents remain sinners too, and that part of staff bringing life to / having life with residents involves sensitively challenging any bad behaviours, while being ready to promote good, peaceful, joyful life which flows from reliance on God / being true(d) human beings together. Perhaps the best summary of this approach is Jesus' approach – in His ministry, so often people saw the needs of others as problems for themselves, whereas Jesus always saw / made life with the person.

In personal terms, the Lutheran Church encourages everyone to put the best-then on display at all times in every circumstance, whatever the reaction to our good love might be – see especially Romans 5 where St Paul summarizes Christ's work this way: (v8) 'God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners [ie, when we were spitting in God's face, as it were], Christ died for us.'

In business terms, we gladly, eagerly, undertake all that needs to be done financially and medically and socially for residents, and planning further accommodations to sustain our facilities in the aged care industry, and easing the government's mind about its regulations being fulfilled – again, not to see results, but as a means serving and providing opportunity for people to taste and see (Ps 34:8) the kindness of the Lord to them too.

– Tim Kowald  
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