

“Luther’s Counsel in an Epidemic”
March 29, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

As I’ve mentioned, our service and our lesson this evening will be a little different than they normally are.

And the lesson will again be a topical one.

Last Sunday evening we considered the example of the early church during the epidemics of their day.

This evening we will consider the counsel of Martin Luther during the epidemics of his day.

As I’ve noted, there are not a lot of contemporary resources for the kind of situation we find ourselves in right now. But this is a time when we can be thankful that the Church is not just a Body here and now, but it is a Body that stretches back over centuries and millennia. Last Lord’s Day we were able to learn from our brothers and sisters in Christ who sought to live out their faith over 1500 years ago. Tonight, we learn from another great saint who carried out his ministry 500 years ago.

As we do this, we seek to follow Paul’s advice in First Corinthians 11:1, to imitate those saints who have imitated Christ. In this case, we seek to learn especially from Luther’s words and instruction.

With that in mind, let’s pray together.

Lord, your Proverbs tell us that by wise guidance we can wage war, and in an abundance of counselors there is victory.

As we face the spiritual battles ahead of us,
we turn now for guidance and counsel to the saints who have gone before us.
We look to their words and we look to their deeds,
as we consider our own.

We ask that you would help us to be imitators of them,
in whatever ways they were faithful imitators of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
And it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

[Based on Proverbs 24:6 & 1 Corinthians 11:1]

In 1527 Martin Luther received a letter from another pastor, the Reverend Doctor Johann Hess, asking for Luther’s advice on whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague.

After some delay, Luther wrote back. But as he did, he also decided to make his letter into a pamphlet for more broad distribution, feeling it could be helpful to other Christians as well.

And Luther’s letter *is* helpful. There are some parts we need not concern ourselves with – as Luther discusses the best placement for cemeteries for those who have died in plague, or as he discusses

the relationship between plagues themselves and the agents of the spiritual world. There are a few items like that that we will skip over this evening, but there are also a number of helpful items.

As I read Luther's letter this week, seven important claims and applications seemed to emerge to my mind. We can call them Luther's "Seven Theses on Living Through a Plague."

What I want to do tonight is simply to go through those seven theses, consider what Luther has to say in each, and then consider how each applies to us.

With that said, let's dive into Luther's "Seven Theses on Living Through a Plague."

The first thesis for us to consider from Luther's letter is: There is no sin or faithlessness in seeking to preserve your own life.

In addressing this directly, Luther is responding to the sentiment some Christians can have that if we are too intentional about avoiding illness in a pandemic – if we take too many steps – then this reflects a lack of faith on our part, and a failure to accept God's providence or his judgment.

Maybe you have heard some form of this argument. Maybe you have made it. I've read it myself coming from some Christians. It's an argument that if we alter our lives too much to avoid a dangerous illness, then it shows a failure to believe God's eternal promises or his eternal providence. And Luther has little patience for this argument.

He writes: "It is not forbidden but rather commanded that by the sweat of our brow we should seek our daily food, clothing, and all we need and avoid destruction and disaster whenever we can, as long as we do so without detracting from our love and duty toward our neighbor."

In any number of situations our calling is to preserve our life, and a plague is no different from any other threat, Luther points out. To support this, Luther points to a list of examples in the Scriptures of when faithful saints took careful steps to avoid danger and preserve their lives. And then, along with that, he presses this argument to its logical conclusion to show its absurdity.

"By such reasoning," he writes, "when a house is on fire, no one should run outside or rush to help because such a fire is also a punishment from God. Anyone who falls into deep water dare not save himself by swimming but must surrender to the water as to a divine punishment. Very well, do so if you can, but do not tempt God, and allow others to do as much as they are capable of doing. Likewise, if someone breaks a leg, is wounded or bitten, he should not seek medical aid but say, 'It is God's punishment. I shall bear it until it heals by itself.' Freezing weather and winter are also God's punishment and can cause death. Why run to get inside or near a fire? Be strong and stay outside until it becomes warm again. We should then need no [...] drugs or physicians because all illnesses are punishment from God. Hunger and thirst are also great punishments and torture. Why do you eat and drink instead of letting yourself be punished until hunger and thirst stop of themselves? Ultimately such talk will lead to the point where we abbreviate the Lord's Prayer and no longer pray, 'deliver us from evil, Amen,' since we would have to stop praying to be saved from hell and stop seeking to escape it. It, too, is God's punishment as is every kind of evil. Where would all this end?"

Luther then brings himself to this conclusion:

“From what has been said we derive this guidance: We must pray against every form of evil and guard against it to the best of our ability in order not to act contrary to God, as was previously explained. If it be God’s will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us.”

Luther’s point is that we are never called to passively just receive what comes our way and assume that action on our part is set against trusting God’s providence, his justice, or his promised salvation. Every meal we eat is active resistance to the fact that if we are just passive then we will die. And acting to preserve our life from illness is no more a sin or a faithless act than eating a meal.

So, Luther’s first thesis is that there is no sin or faithlessness in seeking to preserve your own life.

Luther’s second thesis is that God sends epidemics not only to judge and discipline, but also to test our faith in him and our love for our neighbor.

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And that is an important thing to consider for how we will respond to the current crisis. Sure, God does send trouble to judge those who have rejected him. He also sends suffering to lovingly discipline his people and help them to turn to him and grow spiritually. But God also uses suffering to reveal what lies in our hearts – to reveal it to us, to reveal it to others, even to reveal it to the heavenly hosts, as we see was the case with Job.

In the struggles ahead, God is revealing to you and others what is in your heart, in terms of your relationship to him and your relationship to those around you. How much do you really trust God? And how much do you really love those whom God has placed in your life – your neighbors?

These things are difficult to see when all is going our way. It is easy to obey God as he blesses us – it is easy to love our neighbors if it costs us little or nothing. But trouble like an epidemic brings a cost to faithfulness and love. It is in these times that our hearts are revealed.

Our prayer should be that we will persevere in our faith, and that we will show true love to those around us. That should be one of your primary goals in all of this. Yes: keep yourself from sickness. Yes: try to preserve your finances. But if you do all that and fail to cling to God and trust – if you do all that and fail to love the people God has put in your life – then your true priorities in your heart will be revealed.

These goals of God, that when faced with danger his people would trust him and love their neighbors – these goals are the basis for much of the rest of Luther’s reflections and exhortations in his letter. It also leads him to warn us of its opposite point – which is our third thesis.

If the second thesis is that God sends epidemics not only to judge and discipline, but also to test our faith in him and our love for our neighbor, then the third thesis is that the devil’s goal in an epidemic is to get us to mistrust God and to abandon love for our neighbor.

The devil’s goal in an epidemic is to get us to mistrust God and to abandon love for our neighbor.

If you're not a Christian and you are with us this evening, I'm glad you are. I will not give a full explanation this evening of the Christian belief in an actual devil, as well as other demonic beings that work counter to the purposes of God in the spiritual realm. Such beliefs seem silly to many modern secular people ... though exactly why they seem so silly is a bit of a mystery to me, the more I think of it. There is good in the world, and many find it easy to believe there is a spiritual being behind that good. There is also a lot of evil in this world ... why then would it be so hard to believe in a spiritual being behind that evil?

In any case, Luther warns us that the devil's goal in an epidemic is to get us to mistrust God and to abandon love for our neighbor.

And on this point, it is probably best to simply quote Luther himself. Luther writes:

“When anyone is overcome by horror and repugnance in the presence of a sick person he should take courage and strength in the firm assurance that it is the devil who stirs up such abhorrence, fear, and loathing in his heart. He is such a bitter, knavish devil that he not only unceasingly tries to slay and kill, but also takes delight in making us deathly afraid, worried, and apprehensive so that we should regard dying as horrible and have no rest or peace all through our life. And so the devil would excrete us out of this life as he tries to make us despair of God, become unwilling and unprepared to die, and, under the stormy and dark sky of fear and anxiety, make us forget and lose Christ, our light and life, and desert our neighbor in his troubles. We would sin thereby against God and man; that would be the devil's glory and delight. Because we know that it is the devil's game to induce such fear and dread, we should in turn minimize it, take such courage as to spite and annoy him, and send those terrors right back to him.”

Luther then goes on and encourages us to mock the devil. He tells us to be all the more dedicated to loving our neighbor, so that Christ in heaven rejoices and the devil in hell is frustrated. And he calls on us also to remind ourselves, and to proclaim to the devil how secure we are in Christ – to say to the devil: “If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine. Should not my dear Christ, with his precepts, his kindness, and all his encouragement, be more important in my spirit than you, roguish devil, with your false terrors in my weak flesh? God forbid! Get away, devil. Here is Christ and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail!”

Luther gives us our marching orders, but as modern, often secularized people, we need to hold this truth before us: that just as we read in Job, when difficulties come our way, not only is God testing us, calling us to faith and love, but the devil is also trying to pull us away from God's will – tempting us to mistrust and selfishness.

Luther's third thesis for us to consider is that the devil's goal in an epidemic is to get us to mistrust God and to abandon love for our neighbor.

From there, Luther bases much of his advice going forward on our calling to trust God and our love for our neighbor. He spends most of that time focused on our love for our neighbor, and then at the end he comes back to our calling to love and trust God.

And so the next three theses we will consider all focus on our call to love our neighbors, and the different things that can pull us away from that calling. Our final thesis will turn to the topic of our trust in God.

With that in mind, we come then to our fourth thesis, which is that we must not let our love for high spiritual standards outrank our love for our weaker neighbors.

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What do I mean by that?

Well, right at the beginning of his letter, Luther addresses the fact that in a time of crisis, people – including true believers – struggle. They falter. We can discuss in the abstract what ideal behavior would look like, but the fact is that few Christians live up to that ideal.

Luther says it bluntly early on – he writes: “Since it is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot place the same burden upon everyone.”

That can sound cynical ... but I think there is great wisdom in it – there is biblical wisdom in it.

We are all called to trust God and to love our neighbors. But some have faith to take bigger risks, bigger sacrifices, or bigger acts of faith onto themselves than others can.

And whether we are the ones who do such greater acts, or whether (as is much more often the case, I think) we are sitting on the sidelines considering or admiring such great deeds of faith – we can find ourselves judging those who do not yet have the faith to do such things. We can find ourselves judging those who are weaker in faith.

And Luther, by bringing this point out up front, pushes us to realize that we must not do that.

The Scriptures again and again remind us that it is the duty of the strong to love their weaker brothers and sisters by bearing with them, caring for them, and encouraging them. It comes up in 1 Corinthians 12, in Romans 15, and in many other places.

But often the temptation is instead to judge and disparage those who are weaker in a crisis – those who struggle more with fear – those who struggle more to make sacrifices of themselves for the good of others – those who struggle to trust God the midst of uncertainty.

When we do this – when we judge our weaker brothers and sisters – then we are putting our own high spiritual standards ahead of our calling to love our neighbors. And Luther reminds us that we must not do this.

You have almost certainly looked down on someone in the midst of this crisis – you have almost certainly judged a brother or sister in Christ over how they have responded to this crisis. When was it for you? Who was it for you? And how do you need to repent? How do you need to put your calling to love them ahead of your own expectations for them?

Luther's fourth thesis for us in an epidemic is that we must not let our love for our high spiritual standards outrank our love for our weaker neighbors.

With that in mind then, we come to Luther's fifth thesis for us on living through an epidemic.

Luther's fifth thesis is that we must not let our love for our own health or safety outrank our love for our neighbor by abandoning them.

We must not let our love for our own health or safety outrank our love for our neighbor by abandoning them.

And Luther has a lot to say on this point.

He begins with specific examples. Pastors must love their flock by seeing to it that they have spiritual care and are not abandoned in the time of an epidemic. Likewise, those in public office must care for and govern the people, and not abandon them when they are most needed. Luther goes on to explain that this applies to most relationships where one person cares for another. The obligation to love and care for those under our charge does not go away in a time of crisis; instead, it may intensify, even as it may call us to increased risk of our own health and safety.

But even in saying this, Luther stresses that the point is not that all must take on such risks, but that all must ensure that those under their care have what they need. Pastors, or those in public office, he points out, could get together with their colleagues and make a plan for some of them to stay during an epidemic, while others go, so long as there are enough of them there to care for the needs of the people under their collective charge. Luther sees no need to risk one's health and safety if it is not necessary. But if it is necessary, he calls us to lovingly sacrifice our own security for the good of our neighbor.

Luther applies the same thinking to those in other roles as well. The key is that those who depend on them are cared for. But if that can be done by some while others can withdraw for their own safety, there is no problem with that.

In other words, in a very Augustinian way, Luther is stressing not that we should love our neighbors and *not love* our own health – but that our love for our neighbor should outrank our love for our own health. He is speaking about the order of our loves. And so, if our neighbor's good requires it, we may need to take on necessary risks. But if our neighbor does not require it for their good, there is no point in taking on a risk for no purpose, or for a lesser purpose.

Of course ... loving others at a possible cost to ourselves is the essence of real love – as scary as that might be.

As we see the needs of others and the risk to ourselves, Luther urges us to see the situation rightly – he writes:

“A man who will not help or support others unless he can do so without affecting his safety or his property will never help his neighbor. He will always reckon with the possibility that doing so will bring some disadvantage and damage, danger and loss. No neighbor can live alongside another without risk to his safety, property, wife, or child. He must run the risk that fire or some other

accident will start in the neighbor's house and destroy him bodily or deprive him of his goods, wife, children, and all he has.

“Anyone who does not do that for his neighbor, but forsakes him and leaves him to his misfortune, becomes a murderer in the sight of God, as St. John states in his epistles.”

These can be hard words, but Luther gives us encouragement along with them.

He first reminds us that as we serve our neighbors, we are serving Christ himself. This is what Christ tells us in Matthew 25: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

When we sacrificially love our neighbor, Jesus tells us that we not only serve them, but we serve him. And he will reward us in kind.

And second, Luther encourages us to commit ourselves to God and to God's care – he encourages us to say “Lord, I am in thy hands; thou hast kept me here; thy will be done. I am thy lowly creature. Thou canst kill me or preserve me in this pestilence in the same way as if I were in fire, water, drought, or any other danger.”

When we are called to take on risk to our own health, Luther encourages us to see whom it is we truly serve, and whom it is that truly keeps us safe. In both cases, the answer is God.

In some ways, Luther's exhortations here to risk were relevant more broadly in his day than they are for us today. In Luther's day, while hospitals existed, as he notes within the letter, there were not enough of them for most people to have access. And so most sick people had to be cared for at home ... and needed someone there to attend to them in life-threatening cases of illness. Today, with our larger medical industry that is not normally necessary ... though the capacity of that system is one of the things we are concerned about in the current crisis.

For some of you, though, your regular work calls you to take such risks. There are many essential workers out there, and as they go about their work, they are taking on extra risk, and they are doing it, Luther would remind us, in order to love their neighbors. If you are one of those essential workers, hear Luther's encouragement and exhortation.

Within those essential workers, some are especially placing themselves at risk. Chief among those would be those in the healthcare industry and first responders. Luther encourages you to see that at the heart of what you are doing is your Christian calling to love your neighbor. God sees your sacrifices. He sees your risks. It has not escaped his notice. Know that he rejoices in the love you are showing to others, and that your love reflects his, to those around you, and even to the heavenly hosts that look on.

For those of us not called to such work right now, we must dedicate ourselves to prayer for those who are. Let us pray especially for our brothers and sisters who are doing this important and sacrificial work.

And then, more broadly, we may be called to love our neighbors in new ways in this situation. Perhaps it is by doing shopping for someone we know who is more high-risk. Perhaps it is by serving others in a different way. Perhaps it is by checking in on those we know are alone. Some

opportunities will involve risk. Some only time. How might Christ be calling you to love your neighbor in special ways in this season?

Whatever it is, in ways great and small, Luther reminds us in his fifth thesis that we must not let our love for our own health or safety outrank our love for our neighbor, by abandoning them.

Luther's sixth thesis is that we must not let our love for our own independence outrank our love for our neighbor by being reckless.

We must not let our love for our own independence outrank our love for our neighbor by being reckless.

In this, Luther was something of a fan of social distancing before it was cool.

I'll let Luther speak for himself. He writes:

“Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.

[...]

“It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have. He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody were trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire.

“No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; [...]; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body?”

Luther has no patience for those who by their carelessness – who by insisting on their independence – put not only themselves at risk, but others as well, as they may pass the epidemic on within the population of their city.

Should their actions lead to their own death, Luther says they would be guilty before God for taking their own life, and should their actions lead to the death of others, he says they would be guilty of murder before God.

Luther even goes so far as to say that anyone who has the disease, and knowingly or intentionally exposes others to it, should be executed by hanging as an assassin.

Luther's advice here is strong. One recent article points out that the emphasis he places on distancing from others during an epidemic would have sounded overly cautious to sixteenth-century ears. [Martin]

But Luther's caution is not grown out of fear or faithlessness. It is grown out of a deep conviction that whatever situation we find ourselves in, we are called to love our neighbors. Our duty to love our neighbor is to outrank our love for our own security. But it is also to outrank our love for our own independence.

And so we are willing to restrict ourselves, not only for our own good, but to love our neighbors and to preserve them from sickness and danger.

Luther's sixth thesis is that we must not let our love for our own independence outrank our love for our neighbor, by being reckless.

Which brings us to our seventh and final thesis for tonight from Martin Luther. Having focused on our calling to love our neighbor in the midst of an epidemic, Luther then turns to our calling to place our faith in God during an epidemic.

Luther's seventh thesis is that we must attend to God *now*, and be prepared to die.

We must attend to God *now*, and be prepared to die.

Luther calls on people in a time of epidemic to be even more engaged in worship, and even more attentive to the Word of God, read and preached. He calls on them to be even more dedicated to being reconciled with one another. He calls on them to being even more diligent in confessing and repenting of their sins. He calls on them to be especially vigilant in getting right with God.

Of course we never know the hour of our death, and death could come upon us any minute. But as Jerid Krulish, our former assistant pastor here, put it to me recently, while any of us can die at any time, there are some circumstances in life that seem to put that reality before us in big neon letters. An epidemic can be one of those circumstances.

If you are a Christian, you should be all the more attentive to your relationship with God – because your faith may be tested ... and because if this gets as bad as it has gotten in some places, then it's not out of the realm of possibilities that you may stand before God sooner than you think.

Are you ready for that?

Luther urges us to be ready. He urges us to take advantage of the means of grace as often as we can – attending to the Word, to worship, and to prayer. He urges us to make peace with those we have had conflict with. He urges us to repent of our sins all the more diligently. He urges us to love our neighbors, that we may live out our faith truly. He urges us to cling to Christ in faith, that we may be found doing so should death knock on our door.

And for the non-Christian, Luther urges you to wake up from your spiritual stupor. Many, Luther points out, want to put off taking their spiritual life seriously. He recounts cases of very sick people, lying in bed, knowing that they are not right with God, and yet putting off calling a minister or

dealing with their souls, because they assure themselves and those around them that they will get better soon. And then they die. And after a life of rejecting and rebelling against God, with no true repentance, they stand before their Maker. They spend a lifetime running from God, and in the end, they get what they had sought: an eternity away from the presence of God – away from his love, away from his warmth, away from his joy. They get eternal spiritual independence ... they get eternity away from the presence of God ... and it is horrific. It is hell.

If you are not a Christian, or if you are a Christian who has failed to take your spiritual life seriously, *now* is the time to turn. *Now* is the time to return to God. *Now* is the time to actively seek God in faith and repentance.

Stop putting it off. Stop delaying. You do not know what will come tomorrow. Get right with God, before you stand before him and face his judgment.

Luther's seventh thesis, is that we all – each one of us – must attend to God *now*, and be prepared to die and stand before him.

Luther's 500-year-old letter to Christians about living through an epidemic is strikingly helpful and relevant to our lives right now.

He gives us these seven theses, and I think that as we hear them, we all can see that we have areas in our lives to reconsider in light of them.

Consider them again:

1. There is no sin or faithlessness in seeking to preserve your own life.
2. God sends epidemics not only to judge and discipline, but also to test our faith in him and our love for our neighbor.
3. The devil's goal in an epidemic is to get us to mistrust God and to abandon love for our neighbor.
4. We must not let our love for high spiritual standards outrank our love for our weaker neighbors.
5. We must not let our love for our own health or safety outrank our love for our neighbor by abandoning them.
6. We must not let our love for our own independence outrank our love for our neighbor by being reckless.
7. We must attend to God *now*, and be prepared to die.

Some of those will come easily to you. Some will seem obvious to you. Some are so obvious to you that you have been frustrated with others for failing to see them.

But others ... will be a challenge. Which ones are challenging you? Which ones do you need to focus on, and pray about, and attend to this week?

We will look back at what happens in this time, and we will consider the health effects, the economic effects, the political effects, and more.

But also important – in some ways more important – will be the *spiritual* effects of this time. And not just the spiritual effects on an abstract national scale, but the spiritual effects on the personal level: the spiritual effects for you and for me.

How you respond to this will shape those spiritual effects.

So hear the instruction from Martin Luther, coming down to us over the centuries. Consider where you most need to grow in your faith in God, and your love for your neighbor.

And then pursue that growth *this week*.

Look to Christ, and ask for his help. Ask God to be at work in you by his Spirit. Cast yourself on the Lord in faith. And then seek to live a life of faith and love in the midst of this crisis.

For we are Christ's people. And that is our calling.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Luther, Martin. Letter to Reverend Doctor Johann Hess, pastor at Breslau. *Luther's Works*. Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II. Edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, pages 119–38. Reprinted by *The Lutheran Witness*. <https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>

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