

A Theology for One Lutheran Diaconate in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The tri-fold character of our life in God

Those who love and know God through the good news of Jesus Christ and the movement of the Holy Spirit intuitively practice a life of proclamation-thanksgiving-service (*Kerygma-Eucharistia-Diakonia*). Proclaiming the gospel of justification, joyfully offering thanksgiving even with every breath, serving the neighbor near and far simply because love cannot help but do so: To do these is the desire of every Christian. It is also the rhythm “down deep” in every corner of creation, as the biblical writers, mystics and Martin Luther himself proclaimed.¹ The practice is not sequential, however. It is organic. Just as there “is” no God the Father without the Son and Spirit, no one without any of the others, so also proclamation never arrives without thanksgiving and service and there is no one of these three actions without the other. This is simply the character of the full Christian life.

The character of the Christian life depends upon the very character of God. Christians are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the eternal event of the three divine persons living with, for and through each other as the consummate expression of inexhaustible love. The love of, in and from God Trinity has no bounds. This love eternally and infinitely sends and receives itself. The flow and flux and flowering of love in God cannot be contained even in God. It is not enough for God to enjoy the love within; the love wills to create and sustain others. To know and confess that God is love, then, is to state that *diakonia* (neighborly care or service), too, is innate and integral to the character of God. *Diakonia*, too, flexes and flows and flowers. *Diakonia* within God ensures that the creation by God is respected, loved and served. The character of the full Christian life *theologically* understood reaches ever outward with care for the neighbor and all the creation. This is also part of what it means for the human being to be created in the very image of God.

***Diakonia* includes apostolicity**

Another aspect of the triune life is the self-giving, the “sentness” of the divine persons. As the very energies of God Trinity go ever beyond God to and through all that God loves, all who are sent by God are impelled by God’s essential apostolicity. As the divine persons are sent, so also God’s children. As we are sent, so also we are charged by the same apostolicity that energized the prophets and disciples. Apostolicity belongs to the language and vocation of our baptism into Christ. A robust missional imagination, then, characterizes all who would daily live from the joy and impulse of our baptism. So this missional imagination, this apostolicity, this “sentness” is integral, too, to diaconal service.

In turn, diaconal service strengthens this church’s right emphasis on evangelical mission as an en-fleshed expression of the love of God that sends and receives. God’s children-servants daily find Jesus’ promise of human fulfillment fulfilled when we give ourselves away and then receive ourselves and more in return. Likewise, *diakonia* does not possess itself while it serves others. *Diakonia* is always a giving and sending of one’s self *to* the other, especially *for* and *to* the other however and wherever the other is. Indeed, when God’s servants are sent, we carry not our

selves, but God's strength clothed in weakness to serve precisely the weak. In this cruciform way God sends God. We who also are in and with God are sent out *to* wherever those who need God's love through us are, *however* they are. Sent-ness and self-giving all redound with the wonderful urgency of God's love that is always outward bound. And God's love is urgent because of the urgency of all who are bound by suffering, those whom God loves so particularly.

Sent to serve at the cross

So we proclaim, we thank, and we serve. This Christian "tri-fold rhythm" within the triune life clearly indicates God's character and what God intends for our life and where we find our life wanting. *Diakonia* is precisely the call to the disciple to serve because on the mortal side of eternity it denotes the practical need to fulfill that to which *Kerygma* and *Eucharistia* aspire, even as we already live in the fullness of God's grace. At the root, in the cracks, on the edges, and at the center of the daily grind everywhere and anywhere, God intends abundant and peaceful life.

This is also the meaning of the Lutheran "Theology of the Cross." The *theologia crucis* is rooted in God's diaconal character. God in Jesus Christ is Emmanuel with humankind in all our situations. God suffers where any suffer. Yet, despite, in, and beyond suffering, God promises resurrection. Resurrection begins with God's healing of the creation now, whenever and wherever the Gospel is received. The new life transforms into the celebration of perfect peace, justice and joy forever.

This is the presumption of every more formalized Lutheran theological theme. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit lives in intimate solidarity with every suffering person. Therefore, wherever one works to announce God's forgiveness, to heal, to bring peace, to establish justice, to harbor hope and proclaim promise—especially at the suffering places where stands the crucified God—there one serves Christ himself and there the servant makes visible to the served the God who insistently and selflessly is with us. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40). To the "least of these" and more—all in their uniqueness of spirit, time and place—the Christian in gratitude is sent and self-giving. Would that all Christians, all the church, be more evidently so diaconal.

By what authority?

So who is it who makes Christ visible so trenchantly in the suffering places and easily in the joyous places? And by what authority? All Christians are called by God to serve wherever Christ's cross is planted. This poses a problem for the self-preserving church, that church that prefers its own maintenance over its God-given mission. To acknowledge that mission comes before self-preservation, of course, does not mean that there is no place for self-care. Self-care is necessary insofar as it empowers mission and it is mandated by mission. This is as true for healthy institutional forms as it is for individual people. But God's desire that all are to serve poses also a freeing possibility for the church to be "a church for others." When Jesus asked us to follow him, he did not provide rubrics and caveats as to who is or is not qualified to serve. In the ultimate sense, personal or learned qualifications have nothing to do with the matter. Only Christ's grace and Christ's call matter. Whomever Christ graces, Christ calls, and all whom Christ calls Christ graces: All whom Christ has called to serve and all who have heard that call

have been given the gifts to love, serve, heal, forgive, proclaim; to be and to present Christ himself.

Christ's call to serve is the Christian mandate and Christ himself the final authority. If we do not love and follow in response, without condition, it is only because we have not yet or again not heard. All Christians are called to bring their and God's joy to every place of suffering and shame, the cruciform places, whereby the God who bears the pain of our darkness will be revealed as the God of greater light. God's light overcomes the darkness, and perfect love casts out all fear. The authority to serve and "be" Christ is the authority of God's own creative, life-giving love uttered as the call for those who love God to love all others: daily, randomly, regularly, systematically and even institutionally.

It is the tragic truth, though, that only the naïve and innocent can love and serve with pure abandon. Even then, those who are served by love need service that is appropriate to their circumstances. They need a knowing love and response-able service. Because of sin, "our age-old rebellion," none really are innocent, and love in service to the neighbor must, therefore, be all the more enabled by God's grace and resourced by human wisdom. Thus the church through the ages has rightly not only organized and re-organized itself to serve the neighbor, but has educated and re-educated itself on how best so to do given the challenges of its ever changing contexts. At various times in the life of the church, the degree of dramatic change in the cultural context has called for urgent and dramatic re-shaping of the church's witness and service. For such a time, that for which the church stands and its public means for doing so need to be clear, simple and coherent with its own and the Great Tradition. The church's convictions and the ways by which the convictions are expressed also must be adequate to the needs of the newly urgent time.

To serve in *this* time

This is such a time. Technologized globalization has brought the neighbor from afar to within our daily consciousness. She with her hijab and he with his aggressive secularity, yet both and all previously "others" appear to us as more regularly gracious and surprisingly "human" than stereotypes entertain. Today the parable of the good Samaritan is far less an abstraction from another distant culture and far more a daily opportunity for concrete neighborliness. Close friends and real faces speaking from what only a generation ago were unknown value systems make real for us the challenges and opportunities of postmodernity: that there is no longer a "universally accepted" religious disposition or common story, but only one massive and diverse public market wherein values, meanings and commodities all are the stuff of campaigns to buy and vote.

To compound the challenge of this popular philosophical shift that has introduced the Areopagus (Acts 17:22ff) to this digitized day with even more pluralism than recognized by St. Paul, the literature of the educated "millennial" generation today redounds with nihilism and insignificance. Given the dour and connected global economy, as well as the over-abundance of "options" for self-meaning construction (from a surplus of fundamentalisms to a surplus of mere metaphors), life for too many today is experienced as if the presence of so much means the endurance and eternal meaning of nothing. How shall Christianity answer this but by way of beginning again with what only has "worked" in every previous urgent time: gospel-inspired acts

of simple love that bring healing and comfort to the needy, the *diakonia* which for St. Francis was the preferred mode of proclamation? Postmodernity, religious and philosophical pluralism, multiculturalism, globalism, the complexification of life: All call for clearer and simpler forms (offices) of modeling service that can be understood more readily within and beyond the church.

The complexities of this post-modern time notwithstanding, there is clear understanding and even surprising agreement within and beyond the church as to what the office of “pastor” means. For Lutherans, this is expressed in the ordained Ministry of Word and Sacrament and is given its “constitutional” basis in the Augsburg Confession, particularly Articles 5 and 7. While the role of pastor through the ages has, of course, borne the character of *diakonia*, it is fair to say that the pastoral office by design emphasizes much more the formal presentation of *kerygma* and *eucharistia*.

There has not been such a clear understanding of *diakonia/service*, however, as a public office in the Lutheran tradition. While there is no explicit commendation for a ministry of service in the early Lutheran movement, Luther and the reformers did not shrink from advocating faith active in love to neighbor. Indeed, one can argue forcefully that much of Luther’s energy for reform was driven precisely because the current practice of the church hierarchy inhibited the active love of neighbor precisely. In turn, this inhibition was and is the child of anxious selves; as Luther diagnosed it, salvation by “works” was so overwhelmingly burdensome to the individual conscience that one was never free from insecurity about one’s own future.

But once faith was freed from this errant church system, on which most reforming energy was necessarily spent, Luther could see nothing more natural and right than a Christian serving one’s neighbor. Put otherwise, Luther could not even imagine the “humanity” of anyone who would not care for his or her neighbor, even when directly threatened by a plague.² Luther did occasionally advocate for a formal diaconate to aid the poor, as well as to free priests of “the burden of temporal matters.” But any following of his encouragement was as sporadic as the counsel itself.³ Faith freed so to be active in love for neighbor and world was the Lutheran movement’s first goal. If focus was therefore more necessary on a clerical restructure so that evangelical preaching and care could abound, faith with reason (!) would find its own way to love the neighbor.

Very early with the Reformation, Lutheran ministry also became defined by two German words, *Pfarrer* (which primarily meant pastor-preacher) and then also by *Dienst* (service), which provided the content of the office (*Amt*). The two ways of seeing the one renewed reality of the ministerial office perhaps already showed, too, that it was difficult to distinguish public neighbor-care from the priestly liturgical role. In other Protestant experiments, as with John Calvin’s project in Geneva, ministry was more explicated to include a formal role for *diakonia*. With Lutheranism, sometimes the pastoral office has assumed the role of service (mostly as circumstances demanded). The absence of a formalized public order for *diakonia* was noted and corrected in the work of pioneers like Theodore and Fredericke Flidner in Kaiserwerth, Johannes Wichern in Hamburg, and Wilhelm Loehe in Neuendettelsau, all in Germany in the early 19th century. Deacons and deaconesses have a wonderful, though largely underappreciated, presence in Lutheranism since then, thanks especially to the founding work of John Passavant and Sister Elizabeth Fedde, among many others.⁴ The ordained office of deacon belongs to the

order of other Christian traditions, as with, for example, in the Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Icelandic Lutheran churches. It is noteworthy, too, that ecumenical full-communication partners have instituted the ordained diaconate. For the ELCA today, 20 years of diaconal ministers, along with the longer lived numbers of associates in ministry and the deaconness communities, have demonstrated a growing, significant but still small part of the public office representation of *diakonia*. These stand alongside and within the excellent many institutional ways that service to and for the neighbor has been carried forward, as with hospitals, rehabilitative and convalescent services, homeless shelters, orphanages and the outstanding ministries of Lutheran Social Services.

Making it more ‘personal’ and re-formed

These are all celebrated and needed forms of *diakonia*. They must be sustained and prospered. But they also, perhaps with some irony, do not convey the immediacy and *integral* necessity of service within the trifold rhythm of full Christian life. They are not even necessarily visible as acts from and within our congregational centers of Christian life. Too often they can be regarded only as para-church agencies deserving of a congregation’s financial support (to be sure!), though not necessarily expressive of one’s “personal” stake in their missions. How might we better model, honor and grow the daily life of the Christian with fulsome proclamation-praise-service? And—surely also an important matter—how might we honor and grow those already in the ELCA who serve in roles of *diakonia*, the unification of whom can mean more common and effective witness/service for them and a clearer, even evocative, opportunity of formal service for others in discernment about their own vocational futures?

The very nature of the church’s mission, those already who serve formally in diaconal ministries in the ELCA and “the times” suggest that this church would do well to clarify and make more compelling the ways by which we serve the needs of God’s world, always for *this* day. We are also free to do so in whatever ways prove adequate, as the history of the church has shown, even on “ad hoc” bases, as the circumstances of *diakonia*’s formalization in Acts 6 show. Beyond ensuring that the Word is properly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered by way of the ordained Ministry to Word and Sacrament, the church must and is free to arrange its other ministries as best fits the day, as best evokes response in daily vocations, and as best sets example for how all the baptized can fulfill our vocations. There is nothing more theologically and confessionally right to do than this, if even the role of *diakonia* is less explicitly addressed in our confessions than in our theological premises.

There is enspirited genius already in the “constitution” of the Lutheran movement to be so. AC 5, 6, 7, and 28 taken as a group call for the gospel to be proclaimed and structures freely adopted to serve the gospel’s advance. We infer, with the vast majority of the tradition, that so we may proclaim the gospel more robustly and serve the neighbor, we are free to adopt new structures and ways of “performing” faith-freed-to-love that neither subtracts from what is essential to our confession nor adds new essentials to it. We seek rather to perform our catholic faith with our ever-reforming Lutheran attitude. Indeed, we believe on theological grounds that we best “perform” God’s character—that is, practice faithful discipleship—by sharpening the shape and emphasizing the content of public diaconal ministry.

Many write today about what is required for the church's renewal. This is not a new practice. All church history is composed of new voices singing variations on one song and of what happens when the song becomes unrecognizable. Sometimes creativity for its own sake turns the ear away, particularly when what is familiar and loved is not honored. Sometimes ancient and not so ancient rote does the same with what may be very familiar, but appears to have no bearing on one's present personal and public life. This inevitable dynamic of history is recognized and respected by the Lutheran movement's principle of *semper reformanda*, always reforming. We reform freely so to be true both to the gospel and to present ears, eyes, mouths: all people and all senses, wholly. We change—which is to reaffirm daily, for *this* day our baptismal covenant—so to perform our faith expressly for *this* day like no other day. We change to address and love *this* day because we really do want to face head-on “weariest religions” and a “weariest planet” and because we believe “God does not heal without human hands.”⁵ We believe down deep in our life in God that we are meant for neighbor-service, *diakonia*. And we need servants who are both neighbor-servants and exemplars, hands-on diaconal coaches to be with us and all fellow-sufferers wherever we are on the daily journey. For today, this age-old expression of Christian service may indeed look like something wholly in keeping with our history and yet emergent with a new vigor and face for this day.

Conclusion

We believe that the world, as well as this church, would be better served were a new unified diaconal ministry to stand alongside the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. It would be a ministry that is “flexible enough to offer a wide range of ministries and models for supporting the baptized in daily life.”⁶ Such a diaconal ministry is biblically rooted, historically informed, ecumenically related and missionally driven. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lives from a theological foundation that allows for a Ministry of Word and Service. More significantly, this foundation and the trajectory it has propelled in the ELCA's young life commend that we adopt and adapt such a ministry for the empowering of all who proclaim-give thanks-and serve as the right rhythm of our life together in God.

The text authored by the Rev. Dr. Duane Larson was adopted by the Word and Service Task Force.

¹ Marc Lienhard, “Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*. New York: Crossroad, 1988, 291ff.

² “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague (1527),” *Luther's Works*, 43: 119-38.

³ “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” (1520), *Luther's Works*, 36: 11-57.

⁴ For an excellent overview of the topic, see Susan Wilds McArver, “A History of the Diaconate,” in Duane Larson (ed.), *From Word and Sacrament, Renewed Vision for Diaconal Ministry (ELCA: 1999)*.

⁵ See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion, The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2012) 239.

⁶ Stephen P. Bouman, *From the Parish for the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 219.