



# Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Dear Synod,

This Pastoral Letter comes with many starts and stops in writing as I reflect on the actions of all the branches of our federal government. It also comes after I have engaged individuals in positions who are responsible for the care of the “least of these” in our synod and beyond. It also comes after I have reflected upon the words of our presiding bishop and other leaders in our church. It also comes as I have witnessed the tiredness in the bodies and the eyes and voices of those who have are engaged in responding with thoughtfulness and mercy to all. This pastoral letter is by no means a final word as actions on the federal level will have implications for all of us in our individual and corporate lives.

3 February 2025

Ansgar, Bishop of Hamburg, d. 865  
Missionary to Denmark and Sweden

*...for I was hungry and you **gave me food**, I was thirsty and you **gave me something to drink**, I was a stranger and you **welcomed me**, I was naked and you **gave me clothing**, I was sick and you **took care of me**, I was in prison and you **visited me**. Matthew 25:35-36*

Dear Synod,

The theme of judgement runs throughout the gospel of Matthew. In the final parable, referenced above, the question “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” is asked twice. Once by a group which seems to excuse their inaction or place the blame on the Son of Man, as if to say, “You didn’t show yourself, how could we act?” And the other group seemed to act in holy unawareness. We do not have an excuse not to act, blaming the other only reveals our own faults and we are aware of our Lord’s call to follow and be his disciples and witnesses to the end of the earth.

In Luther’s Small Catechism we read, “You are not to kill.” Luther explains, “We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of or neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.” In Hebrew the commandment is addressed to the individual – you. But Luther expands the commandment to the whole of the community by beginning his explanation by saying – we. We are to fear and love God. And it is not an explanation to not murder an individual but more expansive to support our neighbor in all of life’s needs.

Luther expands upon this definition in the Large Catechism noting, “We must not kill, either by hand, heart, or word, by signs or gestures, or by aiding and abetting.” And, “this commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so.”

Luther continues, “If you send a naked person away when you could clothe him, you have let him freeze to death. If you see anyone who is suffering from hunger and do not feed her, you have let her starve. Likewise, if you see anyone who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse

that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved. ...”

Luther concludes, “God rightly calls all persons murders who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life. He will pass a most terrible sentence upon them at the Last Day as Christ himself declares He will say: “ I was hungry and you...” Luther has much to say as he expands on the implications of this commandments in our live.

In these current days those who care for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned, for the least, last, lost, littlest, left behind, left out, are accused and attacked by known and unknown individuals leveling accusations and claims and they are killing by word, signs and gestures and by aiding and abetting. It may be but a matter of time when murderous words held in the heart become actions by hands which bring physical harm and death to the neighbor.

We are Lutheran Christians and many of us have our cultural roots in Europe. This past week marked the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. There is still a level of shame in the Lutheran church in Germany for their support of the Nazi regime and for staying quiet while others were labeled and exterminated. It is easy to memorize and quote the fifth commandment with its explanation. It is another to place oneself in the position of dying for the sake of neighbors we recognize or do not recognize.

We Lutheran Christians are not known for our defiance as we hold that God works through both the institutions of the church and state. And we acknowledge it is hard at times to see God working through either institution. Yet as individuals we can be life and not death. As members of the ELCA and the NWPA synod we can act on behalf of the neighbor by remembering the simple gestures of life which Jesus speaks about in his parable. As citizens of the United States we can lift up our individual voices so that those who make, administer and judge our laws will hear and see our desire to be a nation of good counsel and merciful assistance to those in need.

“I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

Called to Serve,

Bp. Michael Lozano

Scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Quotes from Small and Large Catechism are found in the Book of Concord Kold-Wengert edition.

[Bp. Eaton response to Musk and Flynn](#)

[Bp. Eaton Message on Executive Orders](#)

[Bp. Eaton Immigration Executive Orders](#)

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