

OF SYMPTOMS AND SYSTEMS¹

Introduction

The Gospel of John is sometimes called the Spiritual Gospel. The term ‘spiritual’ often implies something totally other-worldly or mystical. Taken on its own, our Gospel text might seem spiritual in that sense alone. But I remind you that this Gospel begins with a clear affirmation of the incarnation: the Word became flesh, the Word dwelt among us. And it speaks of eternal life in the present tense, not just as something relegated to a far-off sweet by-and-by or to a remote heavenly space. Thus when used of the Gospel of John – often also called the Gospel of Love – the term ‘spiritual’ must not exclude matters of love and service or of justice and peace. John is thereby spiritual in an additional, this-worldly way – as are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which have even more instances of this-worldly concern.

What I want to do today is to elaborate a spirituality that includes a this-worldly dimension: more specifically, a spirituality that addresses the reality of suffering in the world. I want to speak about the biblical witness to God’s word and will about the symptoms of human suffering, the economic systems and social structures that sometimes produce or worsen suffering, and how we might address those issues more effectively today – here in Charlottesville and around the globe. What I will be saying represents my current best take on the meaning of this central segment of our moral lives, seen from my vantage point toward the end of life.

There are two main strategies for dealing helpfully with human suffering and need. *First*, there is the strategy of alleviating the symptoms of distress directly. Clearly this is an obligation of the people of God in the world, spelled out in no uncertain terms throughout the biblical literature and carried forward through the centuries by both Jews and Christians until our own day. We are to love our neighbors – especially our hurting neighbors and even our hostile neighbors – as ourselves: in practical, down-to-earth ways with practical, down-to-earth effect.

The *second* strategy – also modeled in the Bible, though less frequently so – the second strategy has to do with changing the systems and structures of society in order to reduce the symptoms of suffering. One example of this is the phenomenon mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures called the Year of Jubilee. Years of Jubilee were to be observed once every half-century. During such a year, all land was to be returned to its ancestral owners and all Israelite slaves were to be freed. It was a country-wide plan designed to redistribute land – the source of wealth – more equitably and to restore freedom

to the enslaved. It was a policy meant to help the people of God level the playing field of life for all people.

The goal of the first strategy is to relieve the symptoms of human misery. The goal of the second strategy is to reduce suffering by changing unjust economic, social, and political systems. A leading sociologist of religion once called the first strategy “Christian welfare” and the second “Christian action.” Using more biblical language, we might describe them as the “priestly call to care” and the “prophetic call to change” models.

First strategy: alleviating the symptoms

Let’s begin to explore the strategy of alleviating the symptoms of suffering by looking at examples of that strategy being implemented today. We don’t have to look far. Peace Lutheran has been and is responding to the symptoms of suffering through ministries such as PACEM, the Salvation Army, Adopt-a-Family, Reading Buddies, Food Bank, SARA, Hollymead school supplies, prison ministry, Christian Miracle Offering, mission trips, and so much more.

What are the positives in all of this service work? There are many: let me mention just three. *First*, as I stated earlier, we have both biblical and historical precedents for such activities by the people of God. From the offering of what could at times be life-saving hospitality to friends and strangers alike in the Hebrew scriptures to the story of the Good Samaritan in the Christian bible, our responsibility has been articulated unambiguously: to help; to assist; to cooperate in the repair of those who are broken, such as battered women and children; to participate in the reclamation of those who have been shunted aside, such as the homeless. We have a priestly call to care, a Christian obligation that turns out to be an opportunity: to attend, as agents of Jesus the compassionate Christ, to the welfare of those who – in whatever way – aren’t making it.

Second, these efforts – even the smallest of them – make real differences in the real lives of real people. Never underestimate the power of a gesture, of a kind word spoken, of a bit of time or talent or treasure shared.

Third, virtually all of the examples of service that I have mentioned, plus additional instances that you may be thinking about, are widely appreciated and applauded. Reputations of the service providers do not suffer. And, with rare exceptions, their lives are neither endangered nor diminished. In truth, such lives are typically enriched and fulfilled in ways that surprise and amaze.

Those are some of the positives of working to relieve the symptoms of suffering. But there are also some negatives. How, for instance, can we dis-

pense much-needed welfare without patronizing the recipients or rendering them chronically dependent on that welfare? It is not easily accomplished. However, the most disheartening downside, the most troublesome and persistent problem is this: we can never do enough. No matter how much we give of ourselves and our possessions, the symptoms seem to multiply much faster than the resources we have for dealing with them. Is this, then, how it ends: we win a thousand skirmishes and yet still lose the war?

Surely Jesus saw this serious problem in his day. He came from Galilee, one of the least prosperous regions of Palestine. He knew first-hand about the omnipresence of poverty and of the poor. He no doubt understood that, for all the good it accomplished, his healing ministry did not eradicate disease. Is there an additional strategy that also needs to be in place? Let me say a few words next about another way: an approach that elicits many more raised eyebrows, disquieting concerns, and even outspoken criticisms. This second, alternative way seeks to transform the very structures of our society.

Second strategy: altering the systems

The social, economic, and political systems that surround, sustain, and sometimes diminish us did not drop from heaven. These are human constructs. We are responsible not only for the good they make possible but also for the evil they sometimes cause. We need to take ownership of the systems, not as uncritical propagandists but as critical people willing to change them when they become unfair and unjust, when they fail to provide for basic human needs, when they dampen the flame of hope.

How do we do this? We can, for example, connect with organizations that promote what we hold to be sound public policies. Some might join the Sierra Club, to work for laws that will result in healthier ecosystems and a more sustainable natural environment. Others might join Lutherans for Life, a group concerned for the unborn. Or we could participate in a public demonstration – a march, if you will – for or against some practice or policy that we care about deeply. Most of us probably have not done things like that. However, it may surprise many of you to learn that we are *all* engaged in efforts to change the system. Let me share three ways in which this happens.

First, your congregation participates in a city- and county-wide organization called IMPACT, which – as most of you know – stands for Interfaith Movement Promoting Action by Congregations Together. IMPACT could be described as people of faith working for justice. This is an advocacy group that counts many area communities of faith in its membership, ranging from Lutherans and Roman Catholics to Jews and Muslims. What does IMPACT do? It lobbies city and county officials for things like more widely

available affordable housing and better public transportation. Which means that *you* lobby. But through this association you do not lobby for your own interests: you lobby on behalf of the poor and the powerless. You do not engage in partisan politics: you engage in efforts to gain the widest possible support for priorities and policies that would work to the advantage of the disadvantaged.

Second, there is also a national advocacy effort, coordinated through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Washington, DC office. There, too, we speak on behalf of the voiceless, of those who tend not to be noticed. We raise issues concerning human and civil rights, trade policy and economic justice, the Middle East peace process, U.S. immigration and refugee policy, and environmental integrity.

Third, we ELCA Lutherans belong to an organization that engages in advocacy at the global level: the Lutheran World Federation. There has been a growing recognition at LWF over the past decades that Lutherans must more aggressively promote humane policies and more assertively protest injustices in the international arena.

So there you have it: we Lutherans sponsor policy advocates – Lutheran *lobbyists*, for God's sake. Let me say that with a different inflection: Lutheran lobbyists, for *God's* sake. We have a prophetic vocation – a prophetic calling – to take a strong stand against injustice and a Christian calling to work actively for peace and for healthy community.

What are the positives of this strategy? Let me mention just two. *First*, peace, justice, and community well-being are social issues, not just personal matters. They require more than generous personal responses: they require wise systemic change, especially if we wish to reduce the incidence of the symptoms of suffering.

Second, this action agenda for systemic change also has biblical precedent. The prophets of old issued unmistakable calls for justice. And they held those in authority accountable. These days, in a democracy, that's us. We must quit complaining about "them" and start fixing what is wrong with our local, statewide, national, and global systems and structures – systems and structures that all too often favor the "haves" at the expense of the "have-nots."

However, there are also some negatives, some problem areas here. In America, we have a special challenge with respect to the relationship of church and state. How can the church engage in effective advocacy on behalf of the poor without becoming embroiled in partisan politics? It is difficult to do. By the way, if as a church we do engage in partisan politics, we will lose some rights and privileges – including the privilege of tax exemp-

tion. Will there ever come a time when our obligation to justice or to peace will demand that we give up that privilege?

If it all seems a bit extreme, consider this: one of the major-party candidates for president last year was an African-American. Whether or not you concur with his views and whether or not you voted for him in the fall election, I think we can all agree that his nomination and election represent a watershed in American social and political history. These developments are inconceivable apart from the Civil Rights movement, led by the black church. This movement would not and could not have achieved the civil rights and voting rights legislative victories without civil disobedience. They – including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. – they had to break the law in order to change the law. Most white Christians were too uncomfortable with this tactic to participate. It is, however, instructive to note that in an era when the line between religious and civil matters was not sharply drawn, Jesus and his disciples were reportedly involved in acts of public disobedience: for instance, they broke the law about Sabbath rest by healing people and by picking grain on Sabbath days. Change comes through challenge.

Conclusion

I should think that we are not dealing here with an either/or dilemma: that either the Christian welfare people have it right or the Christian action camp is correct. We are dealing rather with a both/and situation. We need to continue to relieve symptoms of suffering by providing food, clothing, shelter, basic health care, and other necessities of life. However, this good work must be augmented by opposing unjust systems, by challenging policies that lead not to peace but to war, not to enough for all but to more than enough for only a few. Not everyone is good at both of these strategies: some of us are better at addressing symptoms, others at assessing and transforming structures. But we all need to be mutually supportive – not critical of one another, not dismissive of the strategy that other folks might be pursuing.

Does all of this – or any of this – make sense? Does all of this – or any of this – fall within the scope of God's will and purpose? And where does Jesus fit into the picture? Jesus has high yet not impossible expectations of us all: that we will use our energy and our creativity to move the whole of humanity – from the neighbor down the street to the neighbor around the globe – toward well-being and justice and peace. The gospel – the good news – not only proclaims forgiveness. It also promises a life of meaning and purpose through working with and for the world, both the world of people and the world of nature.

This gospel life is not about selfishness, but about selflessness; not about acquiring, but about distributing; not about keeping more and keeping score, but about uncalculating liberality and service; not about protecting our own status, but about raising the status of others, particularly those of “low estate.” It sounds a bit scary; it appears to be somewhat countercultural; it may challenge some long-held views and values. Nonetheless, contemporary disciples of Jesus often discover that – compared with the competitive pressures of the world to succeed, to be tough, to look good, to be cool 24/7, to craft a worthwhile goal for life and then to calculate a trajectory for reaching it – compared with all that, Jesus’ yoke of cooperative service is easy and his burden of mutual support is light.

To live the gospel life well, we not only need good hearts, re-created by God; we also need good heads, renewed and transformed by God. We need to discern when and where and how to apply the strategies of alleviating the symptoms of suffering *and* of changing systems when they produce or increase suffering. May God the Creator, the Healer, and the Motivator – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – grant us those good hearts and good minds. And may God give us not only convictions, but also the courage of our convictions: to accompany those in need and in pain as they take their journeys toward healing and wholeness. Amen.

Let us pray:

Sovereign Father, loving Lord, and energizing Spirit: help us to be sensitive and responsive healers and helpers when confronted with the symptoms of suffering and need. And help us also to be wise and willing advocates for justice when confronted with unfair and inhibiting rather than fair and enabling systems and structures of our local, national, and global societies. Amen.

¹ Presented by Tom Wilkens at Peace Lutheran Church in Charlottesville, VA on 08/01/09 and 08/02/09.