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CARL HUGHES

Learning from Luther on Covid-19



Plague, pestilence, pandemic—these are not new phenomena. As someone who studies the history of theology, I think that one of the blessings of being part of a religious tradition is being able to look back on how people of faith in ages past have grappled with the scourges they faced.

I have been thinking lately of a short treatise that Martin Luther wrote in 1527, titled “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague.” With all his talk of evil “vapors,” “mists,” and “spirits,” Luther definitely sounds like someone from another era. Then again, he also seems to understand the basics of respiratory transmission. Throughout the treatise, he actually shows a surprising degree of understanding of the nature of contagion and what we would today call public health. In fact, I would say that he has a lot of practical and spiritual guidance for our cities and our country as we struggle with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Luther’s response to pandemic centers around the theme of community. He reminds us that, like it or not, “we are bound to each other.” We live next to each other, we eat each other’s food, and we breathe each other’s air. On the one hand, he says, it is community that makes a pandemic possible, just like it makes a mass fire possible. On the other hand, he insists that the very thing that puts us at risk is also the very thing that can save us. If there’s a fire

burning in our house, it is our neighbors who will help us put it out. So in a time of plague, God calls neighbors to take care of neighbors and to work together to restore the health of the community.

What does it mean to be part of a community during a time of plague? It starts, as it always does, with looking out for others rather than just ourselves. Like Jesus before him, Luther says that loving God means loving people. As he puts it, “service to God is service to our neighbor.”

For Luther, serving one’s neighbor in a time of plague requires first and foremost following the advice of medical experts. He insists that God has “created medicines” and “provided us with guidance” from doctors. He says that to put everything in God’s hands and then ignore experts’ advice would be like refusing to fetch water when your neighbor’s house is on fire.

“What does it mean to be part of a community during a time of plague?”

In Luther’s time as in our own, doctor’s orders started with vigilance about sanitation. Sure, pray to God for protection, Luther says, but then “fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it.” Luther practically issues a lock-down order: “Shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence.” He goes so far as to say that negligence in these matters is akin to murder. He has especially harsh words for

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anyone who has symptoms of the disease and doesn't take precautions not to infect others.

Within the community, Luther says that some people have special responsibilities. For example, doctors and nurses have a calling from God to care for the sick and the dying. In our time as in Luther's, following this calling puts their own lives at risk. Luther promises that God is with them in what they do and says that they should be honored in the community for their selflessness.

Similarly, Luther argues that civic officials are called to be competent and responsible leaders in a time of crisis, always looking out, not for their own interests, but for the good of the whole. He insists that they have a particular duty to look out for the poor and the weak. When they flee from these responsibilities, he says, they sin against God.

Like it does for most, the pandemic currently sweeping our country and my city makes me fearful. As someone married to a hospital nurse, I am especially worried for my wife's safety and that of my family. Still, Luther reminds

me that we have faced pandemics like this before. We can get through them, with the help of God, if we work together for the good of all.

"Luther argues that civic officials are called to be competent and responsible leaders in a time of crisis, always looking out, not for their own interests, but for the good of the whole."

So honor medical professionals and trust their advice. Thank grocery store workers, delivery personnel, and all those who risk their safety for the benefit of others. Remember that whenever we wash our hands, or check in on a neighbor in need, or stay home when we would rather go out, we are truly doing God's work. Finally, as Luther would certainly remind us, have faith that even when we fail, God will never abandon our community or anyone within it.