

Priesthood of all believers

Reimagining universal priesthood as neighborliness of all believers

Editor's note: This series is intended to be a public conversation among teaching theologians of the ELCA on various themes of our faith and the challenging issues of our day. It invites readers to engage in dialogue by posting comments online at the end of each article at www.thelutheran.org.

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By Craig L. Nesson

No slogan from the Reformation has been more misunderstood and less implemented in the life of the Lutheran church than the “priesthood of all believers.” Whereas Martin Luther sought to activate the baptized as the primary ministers in service to the world in daily life, the retention of the term “priesthood” to describe this ministry has misled the church in its fundamental understanding of the nature of ministry.

The choice of “priesthood” to describe *Christian vocation as given to all the baptized* perpetuates a cler-

ical distortion about who the “lay-people” are and how they are called to serve God in the world. Instead of affirming the wonderfully varied expressions of Christian vocation in every arena of daily life, members of the church imagine “real” ministry as what pastors do. Unless church members are doing things that pastors are called to do, it’s not understood as real ministry.

Furthermore, we have been deceived into thinking that real ministry only takes place in church buildings, instead of claiming as ministry what happens through Christian service in all stations of life every day of the week.

In his treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther makes two claims:

- A Christian is perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
- A Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

While these two assertions seem to contradict one another, in reality they are keys to a deeper understanding of the universal priesthood.

According to the first claim, Luther insists on faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ as our only source of forgiveness, life and hope. Christians are right with God solely through the free grace and mercy granted to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are no other masters: no laws, no rules and no need for priestly interventions.

While the word and sacraments normally are proclaimed and administered by those called to the pastoral office, the baptized are in no way

dependent upon clerics as mediators of God’s gifts. By grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, we are set free *from* everything that holds us in bondage — sin, death and the devil (to cite Luther).

According to the second claim — and this is the crucial point — Luther asserts that through Jesus Christ, every Christian is also set free *for* something very specific. While Lutheran theology has been at its best in defending justification by grace, we have been extremely susceptible to the disease diagnosed by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer as “cheap grace.”

Luther already anticipated the sickness of cheap grace by clearly articulating this second aspect of Christian freedom: Christ sets us free *for* service of the neighbor. *Christians are called through baptism to universal neighborliness.*

This is the true meaning of the priesthood of all believers. We need not perform good works to satisfy the demands of a holy God. Rather, as response to the gift of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we offer good works in gratitude to God by serving our neighbors.

In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther wrote: “There is no true, basic difference between laity and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate; all are truly priests, bishops and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.”

At baptism each Christian is



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clothed with Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:27) and “ordained” for daily service to the neighbors God gives them. The service by Christians to the neighbors God gives them in daily life is the highest form of Christian service. The ministry of the baptized in daily life is the vanguard for God’s mission in the world.

The particular ministries of bishops, pastors and diaconal ministers are each properly ordered only when they are directed finally “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

Only a theology of ministry that gives priority to the vocation of the baptized in daily life can renew and reform the mission of the church for the challenges of the 21st century.

Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms (here described as God’s two strategies) for bringing forth God’s reign over all creation says there are distinctive arenas where the baptized are sent to serve their neighbors.

According to the right hand (or spiritual) strategy, the baptized are sent to their neighbors as bearers of the good news message of Christ’s

mercy, forgiveness and healing spoken to others. This is the vocation of evangelizing, practicing the art of evangelical listening to the stories of other people, in order to talk to them about how God is present with them in both the struggles and joys of living.

The work of evangelizing belongs to all Christians, not just to pastors or trained professionals. Only as the baptized claim the vocation of speaking the good news will we become an evangelizing church like unto the church of the New Testament.

The left hand (or civil) strategy says the baptized are sent to serve neighbors in three distinct arenas of daily life.

First, we are to see the members of our families as neighbors God has given us to serve. No matter what the constellation of your particular family, you are called by the ordination of your baptism to relate to its members as neighbors to be served.

Second, we are sent to serve

neighbors through the labor we have been given to do in our jobs or occupations in daily life. No matter how you are employed, Luther would have you search for the possibilities you are given to serve neighbors in your daily work. Whether one works at a business, in medicine, in education, as a homemaker, or some other occupation, God gives you neighbors whom you serve through your employment. Also students and retired people have neighbors to serve in their daily involvements.

Third, you serve neighbors by engaging in your communities for the sake of the common good. Through community organizations like food pantries or homeless shelters, volunteer efforts in caring for the sick or improving the environment, or political advocacy to improve government services

to those in need, Christian people live out their baptismal vocation in service to neighbors. Moreover, there are many forms of Christian service that allow us to reach out to care for neighbors

“(Having told them the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked:) “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:36-37).

in other parts of the globe.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship includes a wonderful rite for “Affirmation of Christian Vocation.” The people of God are asked: “Will you endeavor to pattern your life on the Lord Jesus Christ, in gratitude to God and service to others, at morning and evening, at work and at play, all the days of your life?”

May you be emboldened to reply each new day: “I will, and I ask God to help me.” Only so will the Lutheran church reclaim its understanding of the universal priesthood as *the neighborliness of all believers*. □