

Spring 2021 Conference of Bishops, Mar 5, 2021
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Good morning everyone.

I am an Associate Professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. I see a few faces I recognize from either speaking engagements, my time at LSTC, or when I served a congregation in Metro New York. It's good to see you. And I'm honored to be here with all of you this morning, including my fellow panelists.

So, in responding to this question that we've been posed about what the church looks like after COVID, and what lessons we might glean, I'm going to focus my time on questions of equity and inclusion, particularly as they relate to race and racism in our society.

As was the case in Minnesota, and I presume was the case for many of us wherever we are located, early on in this pandemic, lo these 12 months ago, we saw a lot of media and sloganeering around this idea that we were “all in this together.” I know in grocery stores and spaces around Northfield signs were put up and we saw slick advertisements and brochures. But, it quickly, and painfully became painfully clear that we were *not* all in this together.

The impact of the COVID pandemic has been borne disproportionately by black and brown people, by their bodies, families, and communities. We've seen only recently – just this past week – how efforts were made by politicians to try to cover up or play down the impact of the virus in New York's nursing homes. And I think that cover up and playing down continues when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity. We're quick to count the large numbers of deaths, but not to get out the actual figures of people behind those numbers, and the lives and the lived experience of those individuals.

Furthermore, over this last year, the nation had moments of reckoning. I will not say it was *a* reckoning, to assume some major shift or new direction for the nation. But, there were important moments and events over the past twelve months where attention was paid to questions of police brutality, to the unequal treatment that black and brown people experience in the hands of police, within the legal system, and in other institutions of power that we all are implicated in. Combined, these moments gave us a window into something that is not new, but was new to many people. That gave us the chance to realize what we have been ignoring, either through complicity or outright avoidance.

I would hope that in this moment, as we look back at the last year, look around at the world, and look forward to what's coming next, we as Lutherans can take from this moment a lesson about the racial inequities and injustices in our communities and congregations.

I'm going to lay out what I think are a couple of very good Lutheran reasons for engaging in this work. As a Luther scholar and a moral theologian and Christian ethicist, I sort of start there. And then after that, I'm going to talk about what I think are a couple of reasons why we tend to avoid this due to how we understand the pastoral role. And of course, I see all of you bishops as pastors as well. First to Luther!

I believe there are several deficiencies in how we, as Lutherans, understand our theology and our history. The first is that we often operate and talk about justification in ways that are entirely too thin, too vague, and ultimately too empty. One of my mentors at LSTC, the late Vitor Westhelle, once said that what we need are not “laudatory proficiencies and speaking the right phrases and slogans.” “But what we need,” he said, “is a willingness to be vulnerable, and to hear the cries of the broken, the forsaken, and the frail.” Throughout his writing and life, Vitor warned us we are often fighting against sin, in what he calls a disembodied piety, an attempt to flee to the language of Romans that all have sinned, and to turn that into a thin, milquetoast image of what sin really looks like. I think this does a disservice and a dishonor to Luther’s legacy, to our heritage.

Luther himself discovered through existential angst and deep thoughts and reflection, that justification is the answer to deep questions that gnawed at his soul and gnawed at the lives of his people. His answers to these questions were born out of real experience of angst and fear, coupled with the witness to the ongoing exploitation of God's people, at the hands of those who would profit from their anxiety and fear.

Luther emphasized that Christians are called to serve their neighbor, but he wasn't always clear on what that service looked like. Because figuring that out is our actual work and labor, we can't presume our neighbors' needs; we can't presume our neighbor has no needs. And so moving forward our conception of justification in Lutheran congregations would draw on the witness of black and brown people, to speak for themselves in their own words, and to bear witness to what their needs are and what they're asking for. To see these as demands that bear upon us, as witnesses to sin in our lives, and sin in our worlds, who would dare to witness to God's grace and forgiveness.

Another insight that I want to take from Luther is something that often seems out of place in our modern era – Luther talks about the devil a lot. I don't know about your personal piety or religious upbringing, but I tend to find the talk of the devil a little bit off-putting. And it seems better placed in communities and contexts that I don't associate with. Nevertheless, I think that's my mistake and not Luther's. I think Luther was able to speak of the devil, yes, because of his 16th century perspective on things. But, Luther also mentions the devil because he saw at work in the world forces of evil that needed a name, and needed *to be named* as agents. As things that have intention, ends that are being sought, harms that are being done, where blame and responsibility need to be assigned. I think if Lutherans are to speak rightly of racism, in our midst and in our world, we need to see racism and the whiteness that perpetuates it, as forces of the devil and the demonic. This means we don't see them merely as intellectual failings, of having the wrong kind of ideas about black and brown people. We don't see racism simply as an affective problem, of feeling the wrong kinds of things about black and brown people. But we see it instead, as a plague. Much

like the pandemic that has swept across our country. It is a plague that strikes viciously, silently, but its impacts are all too real. It is a plague that is passed from person to person, as we are careless, and unreflective in how we guard our tongues and guard our actions. It is a plague that will continue to spread unless we check each other, unless we correct each other. Unless we say, “hey, that mask goes over your nose. That's where air goes into your body,” and other helpful tips like this. And it is a plague that, as I said, we must see as demonic. It isn't simply a thing that happens, like some would say the Coronavirus did. It is a plague that is caused and perpetuated because it benefits many of the folks sitting on this zoom call, and many of the folks who are sitting in our pews. It's not simply a force of nature. It certainly isn't an act of God. It is an act of us; a role we play, an act we need to let go.

These are a couple of good and solid Lutheran ways for us to think about the need to respond to racism in our society and in our congregations going forward. But I also suspect there are, beyond these intellectual, theological questions, questions of how we understand the pastoral role. I will say that, in my experience, again I am just one person, most pastors I've encountered and myself as a pastor more often than not, see pastoral role as some kind of mutual referee of the congregation needs, concerns and interests. What does that mean? That means that if I'm a pastor or a leader in this church, I'm there to create or to sustain that space for the balancing of different interests. Where folks with great plurality and great differences can come together. That seems well enough, except often this image of the pastor leads to the extreme, excluding the political from the religious, protecting the spiritual from the temporal. Pastoral leadership in this model, I think, is often driven by the question of who will I lose by talking about X? I have heard so many pastors, either explicitly or implicitly in their preaching and teaching operate from this perspective. Numbers are down, secularism is coming for us. The church is on its last leg. Therefore, we have to preserve. Preservation dominates, and we are drawn to losses, focusing on numbers of dollars and people. It is an image of the church as weak and fragile and broken and it is an image of the church that

hides the strength and power that the church continues to have. It is a false image based on limited experience and narrow interests.

On the other extreme, though, I think we have the image of the pastor as a prophetic partisan. I'm less concerned about this, but I know many of you are and many parishioners are as well. Here we see a pastor using the authority of the office and the time afforded to one in the pulpit and in the congregation to speak strongly and forcefully to issues of the day. Now, this isn't the problem, I think. In fact, this approach to pastoral leadership, instead of focusing on who will be lost by talking about X, I think centers the question around who has already been lost by not talking about some subject. Applied to race, the prophetic partisan pastor is going to wonder why it is that this space is white; not asking how we excluded people of color, but asking why they never felt comfortable to come here in the first place, asking why is it that our black and brown sisters and brothers in Christ, stay away from our congregations and our gatherings because they do not feel and they are not safe places to come and be the whole Christians that God has made them. But I do worry that the prophetic partisan often feels self-righteous. It often feels as if the person is exhibiting some kind of wokeness, there to denounce those people or congregants who have come, or those mealy pastors who aren't doing the right thing.

And so, it isn't so much about standing up for the voiceless or giving space to those who have been excluded, but occupying the space of strength and power and domination over others; an attempt to get one's right or one's image right over getting things right. The better model I would suspect, or one I'd at least offer this morning, is to say that the pastor in their best instantiation is an interpreter of the situation in which they find themselves. Here, I'm leaning on some ideas about hermeneutics. The pastor is not sealed off from my congregation in the world, nor isolated from it. The pastor understands their role as standing there to help people communicate about and evaluate the situation in which we all find ourselves. It is a process of developing self-understanding, not being the final judge. But there's always a process offering particular and thick descriptions of the congregation's situation. Be honest about who in your neighborhood

isn't coming to your congregation. Be honest about why it is that you only talked about race, some days, like around Martin Luther King holiday, or during black history month. Be honest about your own inadequacies and fumbling and failure to discuss race in your personal life and in your congregational life.

Finally, like prayer, we must talk about race and racism “without ceasing.” This doesn't mean that every congregation going forward from these 12 months into the next needs to be about race. Nobody wants that, including black and brown people! Nevertheless, we can't only be talking about race when it happens to be on the news or on the headlines. This might seem topical, but it seems as if we're being driven in these cases by external motivations. The media is making us talk about it. People are forcing us into these conversations, instead of these conversations being driven by our Lutheran convictions and desires.

We need to encourage one another to find ways to address race through intentional moments scattered about the entirety of our ministries. We can't ignore the fact that small moments of discussing race in any sermon, any adult education hour, any coffee hour, and other moments are important and have a cumulative effect. You don't need to hit it out of the ballpark with the one sermon to end all sermons. You need to drop these comments in everywhere you can. This is extremely important, because while we don't see it, these little moments have an impact on people. Look at how people have been impacted by the little things they picked up on social media. “My friends said the Johnson and Johnson vaccine isn't safe.” “Have you heard about this, Q-Anon thing?” People are often picking up little bits of information in passing that then reshape their worldview and their way of acting in the world. I think Lutheran congregations can be a place where race is a sort of thing that finds itself integrated into our lives, into our conversations, and integrated into the lives and work of our congregations. This is a high task. But of course, in some way, we all are in this together.

Dr. Bateza will have an article entitled “Bearing Witness Against Unbearable Whiteness” in the June 2021 volume of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, where he discusses some of the issues above.