
Lutherans and the Blue Note: Vocational Suffering in a Racist Time

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According to Martin Luther, suffering is a defining trait of the Christian life. Christians hang their hearts on the living God; they place themselves before Word and sacrament; they endeavor to love their neighbors as themselves; they also suffer. It may seem counterintuitive for Luther to commend suffering as part of the Christian life, but this commendation makes more sense when we describe the kinds of suffering Luther names.¹ While Luther uses the term “suffering” in various ways across his writings—including the loss of our egos and self-sufficiency as we undergo our justification—I focus on one particular use: vocational suffering. Vocational suffering names the consequences of confessing Christ and serving the neighbor in a world rife with idolatry, indifference, and greed. Because we live in a fallen world, confessing and embodying Christ’s love inevitably invites suffering into the Christian’s life. Just as love of neighbor is a defining trait of the Christian life, so suffering is a defining trait of this neighbor love. For Luther, to be a Christian is to suffer for one’s neighbors.

Now add these realities. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is overwhelmingly White and middle-class. Black Americans are commonly and unjustly killed by police officers. They have suffered and died from COVID-19 at disproportionate rates.² To borrow Eddie Glaude’s language, there is a gap in the way Black life is valued in the United States, specifically insofar as Black life is not considered worthy of the same care as White life.³ Given these grim social realities and Luther’s description of vocational suffering, what is the ELCA’s proper response to these realities? What does vocational suffering mean for those of us who claim Luther as theological heir, are predominately White and middle-class, and live in these social circumstances?

Luther’s understanding of vocational suffering bids us ELCA Lutherans to confront the realities of racialized suffering in the

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United States. This confrontation demands that we name the specific, historical horror of life lived under the regime of systemic racism. It calls Lutherans to bear witness to that suffering, without minimizing that suffering or drawing too hasty parallels to other human experiences. Finally, Luther’s account of vocational suffering calls the church to support in a way that recognizes Black authority in the struggle against systemic racism and the specific tasks to which a predominantly White and middle-class church body is called. In view of this criteria, I will argue that Lutherans are called to suffering with and for their neighbors by listening to their Blues and responding accordingly.⁴ My argument has three steps. The first is to show what vocational suffering is for Luther and how it works. The second draws on Otis Moss’s description of the Blue Note gospel and shows how it mediates the sort of vocational suffering outlined in the first section. Finally, I offer concrete suggestions for members of the ELCA as we attempt to

1. For a comprehensive study of the way the Reformers transformed notions of suffering in the Christian life, see Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2. Wei Li, “Racial Disparities in COVID-19,” at <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2020/racial-disparities-in-covid-19/>

3. Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2016), 30-31.

4. While I focus on one particular theological use of the Blues, there is a rich tradition of using the Blues to think about Christian concepts and experience. Recent examples include Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); J.Kameron Carter, “Apocalyptic Blues: On James H. Cone’s ‘The Cross and the Lynching Tree,’” *Theology Today* 70, no. 2 (July 2013), 213–219, Mark R. Glanville, “The Birth of the Blues and the Birth of Biblical Law in Parallel: A Dialogue with James Cone’s Theology of the Cross,” *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 1 (February 2020):114–127.

love our neighbors as ourselves.

Before beginning my argument in earnest, I need to offer a few caveats. First, making this argument is not meant to suggest that the work described below is not already happening in pockets of the ELCA.⁵ The work of the African Descent Lutheran Association deserves particular attention and acclamation. While acknowledging the good work taking place, we within the ELCA also recognize both the failures of our past efforts and the need for a different approach.⁶ This brief piece is meant to provide some theological tools for this work, in whatever form that takes. Additionally, it should be noted that this piece is written by a White man, and my primary audience is other White people in the ELCA, even as I draw on Black thinkers and uses of language. This is not to exclude non-White readers. The point is simply that a part of this work requires White people speaking about our own racism and racist practices to one another, such that Black people are not asked to do work that is ours to do.

Vocational suffering

For Martin Luther, suffering is written into the Christian life. The first task is to get a sense of why this is so and how this suffering relates to Christian vocation. Begin with the root cause of this suffering: the union between Christ and the believer in justification. Just as Christ gifts Christians his righteousness, innocence, and blessedness before the Father, he also gives them his suffering. Suffering begins as justification takes root and the Holy Spirit begins to reform a Christian's sense of vision and value. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Luther puts the former claim thus: "[S]imply begin to be a Christian, and you will soon find out what it means to be to mourn and be sorrowful."⁷ Notice here the inevitability of suffering. This is not because a Christian has suddenly become a masochist. Christians would like to "be joyful in Christ [and] outwardly too, as much as they can,"⁸ but faith has united them too nearly with Christ and his all saints for this to be the case. Having been joined to Christ, "they must see and feel in their heart so much wickedness, arrogance, contempt, and . . . so much sorrow and sadness."⁹ That is, by virtue of the Christ to whom faith joys them, the Christian's vision and affect begin to change. They begin to see the world's suffering from which they would otherwise avert their eyes. They begin to feel the wickedness and arrogance by which God is left unworshipped and neighborly need is left unmet.

Put in more biblical language, suffering comes as a part of

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repentance. The Holy Spirit works on Christians such that their perception of the world begins to change, hence Luther's emphasis on sight and feeling. As one's vision and values conform more to Christ's, one begins to suffer because of the world's distance from Christ and what he values. Luther knows well the difficulty to which he calls Christians, including attention to neighborly need with little concern for recognition of that work. This suffering is such that the world "cannot stand the idea that it . . . should serve other people with nothing but care, toil, and trouble."¹⁰ At the same, Luther is realistic about this suffering and its toll, noting that "those who mourn in this way are entitled to have fun and take it wherever they can so that they do not completely collapse for sorrow."¹¹ Even with this helpful proviso, Luther has nevertheless made suffering a necessary consequence of justification, and so a necessary part of the Christian life. Christ suffered in his earthly life, and if faith is such that we are joined to this Christ, we can expect the same.

In justification, Christ shares more than his perception of the world with the Christian; he also shares the concrete sufferings of other Christians. A central site of this sharing is the Eucharist. As with justifying faith more generally conceived, the Eucharist joins Christians to Christ such that they are of "one flesh and one bone," as the church takes on the form of Christ and so too his righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.¹² This union with Christ also means union with all of Christ's beloved, including and especially the suffering. So, to be joined to Christ in the Eucharist means that "we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own."¹³ Living this eucharistic union means that Christians will "help the poor, put up with sinners,

5. For example, <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Racial-Justice-Ministries>.

6. Hence the document, *Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity* https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf (accessed 5/19/2021).

7. Martin Luther, "Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount," in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1956), 20. Hereafter: LW 21.

8. LW 21:20.

9. LW 21:20.

10. LW 21:20.

11. LW 21:21.

12. Martin Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods, 1519," in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 35, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1960), 58. Hereafter: LW 35.

13. LW 35:58

care for the sorrowing, [and] suffering with the suffering.”¹⁴ Luther even argues that those who want the Eucharist’s benefits without bearing its burdens are “self-seeking persons, whom this sacrament does not benefit.”¹⁵ If we are to make Christ’s benefits our own through faith, we must be willing to suffer with those whom Christ loves: “we on our part must make the evils of others our own, if we desire Christ and his saints to make our evil their own.”¹⁶ Eucharistically mediated faith joins a Christian to Christ such that she can receive all of his benefits. This same faith also joins Christians to the sufferings of others. Luther is so bold as to make the latter a condition of the former. To experience Christ’s benefits is at the same time to experience the neighbor’s burden, sorrow, and struggle, and to ease those same burdens, sorrows, and struggles in however small a way.

Having presented these brief remarks from Luther, I am now able to summarize one way in which Christians suffer, which I call vocational suffering. This suffering begins as Christians are joined to Christ in faith, and Christ changes their vision such that they see, among other things, the burdens their neighbors bear. When Christ enters the human heart, he brings the human pains of the world with him, and so Christians perceive and feel the world in a more painful way. This new experience of the world should issue in new ways of being in the world. Christians are to bear their neighbors’ burdens while also working to ease those same burdens. This willingness to suffer is, for a Luther, a sign that faith is genuine and Christ’s benefits received.

One may wonder if this picture of the Christian life is too grim, if what Luther describes here is finally the good news of a God who offers the world abundant life. Perhaps we should have some sympathy for the world which refuses this sort of message. Vocational suffering is a necessary part of the Christian life for Luther. That does not mean it is the only part of the Christian life for Luther. Consider the following description of Eucharistic fellowship: “this fellowship consists in this, that all spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him [*sic*] who receives this sacrament.”¹⁷ The same faith that joins Christians to their neighbor first joins them to Christ’s eternal goodness. That is gospel, indeed. So, Christians share all things with Christ. This sharing includes his eternal blessings and the earthly woes that make-up vocational suffering.

Listening to the Blues

So far, I have argued that Luther thinks the same faith that saves Christians will invite their neighbors’ suffering into their lives. Now, assume that we are Luther’s theological heirs and members of a society in which non-White life is devalued and disregarded in personal and structural ways. How might we, as a predominantly White and middle-class church, suffer for our neighbors’ sake, especially when our society is such that suffering and misery are

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disproportionally the lot of African-American and other minority groups? How does this racialized suffering find its way into the life of ELCA Christians in non-tokenized ways?

I suspect the first movement in such work is a genuine grappling with this suffering, such that its reality is neither ignored nor explained away. Recall Luther’s comments about the sight Christ bestows on the believer. If Lutherans are to suffer vocationally, we must learn to see and feel the racialized suffering around us. This sight and feeling may be rightly described as fruit and gift of our justification.¹⁸ Learning to listen to the Blues—as a theologically developed category—is one way to mediate this sight and feeling. Consider Otis Moss’s term “the Blue Note gospel,”¹⁹ whose second word describes not just a musical form, but the Black experience under white supremacy’s regime. For Moss, the Blues are “the roux of Black speech . . . the curve of the Mississippi, the ghost of the South, the hypocrisy of the North.”²⁰ Listening to the Blues results in a change of perspective, in which we “dare to see the American landscape from the viewpoint of the underside.”²¹ When applied to the tasks of Christian practice, the Blue Note gospel entails a

18. Luther’s distinction between grace and gift stands behind this claim. Particularly this claim from “Against Latomus:” “Everything is forgiven through grace, but as yet not everything is healed through the gift. The gift has been infused, the leaven has been added to the mixture.” As regards sight and feeling of racialized suffering, one could put the point thus: our justification does not depend on having the right sight or feeling of racialized suffering. Nevertheless, our justification is such that right sight and feeling of racialized violence is the fruit of justification, a gift that follows God’s gracious acceptance of us in Christ. Crucially for Luther, and for us, while Christ gives us this gift at once, our reception of it unfolds over time.

See Martin Luther, “Against Latomus,” LW 32:229.

19. Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 2. Throughout his text, Moss III uses “the Blues” and “the Blue Note gospel” in overlapping ways. My own use of these terms reflects this precedent.

20. Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 2-3.

21. Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 5. Some readers will note resonances with Dietrich Bonhoeffer at this point. Given the importance of the Black Church to Bonhoeffer’s theological development, this resonance is no mistake. See Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014).

14. LW 35:57.

15. LW 35:57.

16. LW 35:57-58.

17. LW 35:51.

commitment to the whole story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Such a commitment requires naming not only the comedy but also the tragedy of the Gospel story and so of human life lived in its power: "[b]efore you get your resurrection shout you must pass by the challenge and pain called Calvary."²² This Blue Note gospel is the antidote to a Christianity that has been corrupted by "markets, manifest destiny, men," and empowers Christians "to see Christ, Calvary, and the cross once again."²³ As with Luther's comments on vocational suffering, the point here is not to urge despair, but rather to urge an honest reckoning with "tragedy, but refusing to fall into despair."²⁴

Hearing the Blue Note gospel enacts the vocational suffering described above. The first way it does so is in the way it positions White people. Before we are anything else, we are listeners, passive with respect to the truths told. This sort of listening, under the Holy Spirit's tutelage, is one way that change in sight and feeling takes deeper root. Part of vocationally suffering as a White church requires realizing that attempts to control stories not our own is itself a sinful act, a species of bearing false witness against the neighbor. Rather than attempting to renarrate the things we are told or to explain away their impact, we are summoned to listen, to let the Blues linger in our ears until the message is received. And received in such way that our response is not just saying the right words, reading the right books, or posting the right response on social media, but received in such a way that we conduct our lives in different ways than we did before hearing the Blue Note gospel.

The second way the Blue Note gospel instructs us in our vocational suffering is by its commitment to telling and hearing the truth. The truth about the particulars of Black suffering. The truth about racism in the United States in its legion forms, hence Moss's poetic images. The truth about a God whose own body is hoisted on a cross before it springs forth from the tomb for sinners' sake, hence Moss's insistence on telling the whole story of Christ, cross and tomb alike. One may rightly note the resonances between Moss's Blue Note gospel and Martin Luther's theology of the cross at this point. Seeing God most fully revealed at the cross also means hearing the particular sufferings named in the Blues. What James Cone writes of the Blues applies to Moss's theological use of the term, as well: "the [B]lues are about [B]lack life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression."²⁵ Focused on the particularities of Black suffering in this extreme situation, the Blue Note gospel keeps our eyes on the specific forms sin, mercy, and redemption take in our time and place.²⁶ It points out the specific suffering caused by white racism and the way that Jesus Christ responds to these specific harms. In so doing, the Blue Note gospel keeps us tethered to our actual

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world with its actual problems, even as it bids us to hope for the day when all will be well in Christ and we will see God face to face. Just as faith joins us to one another's sufferings, the Blues names the sort of suffering to which we are joined. Given that Luther's description of vocational suffering regards actual neighbors and actual sufferings, this is a helpful corrective to overly abstract accounts of neighbor love.

Moving Forward

The Blue Note gospel bids us, as a predominantly White denomination, to see and feel specific realities which we would just as soon avoid, to hear the truth about Black suffering and the way that we are causes of that suffering. This is a painful experience, no doubt, but, if Luther is right, it is also part of our Christian lives. As such, we should trust that this suffering is meant to bring wholeness. This bearing witness also pales in comparison to the actual pain caused by white supremacy. Vocational suffering comes by virtue of the faith that joins us to Christ and neighbor and will accompany any of our attempts to love our neighbors as ourselves. This suffering, while inevitable, should not lead to despair. For Moss, the opposite is true. The "Blues speech rescues us from acceptance and dares us to move from the couch of apathy to the position of work."²⁷ Of course, we need to be careful here with how we position ourselves with respect to Moss's pronouns. It's not clear that, as a predominantly White church, we should include ourselves in his "us," that we have earned the right to do so.

Nevertheless, a more general point can still be made. I have attempted to cast the suffering that comes from hearing the Blue Note gospel as a specific form of vocation. If that argument is sound, then this suffering is yet interwoven with hope. We are called to this suffering as a part of our vocation. The same faith that calls us to suffer with and for our neighbors has already joined us to Christ's mercy and forgiveness. That mercy and forgiveness is the catalyst for this suffering. Secured in Christ's mercy and forgiveness, we can get to work.²⁸ This work, I think, begins in asking

22. Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 2.

23. Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 15.

24. Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 6.

25. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books: 1992), 97.

26. Cone's worry about a docetic Christ offer precedence for this concern. See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 99-126.

27. Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching*, 7.

28. For another helpful list of suggestions for concrete action see Anthony Bateza, "Reclaiming the Legacies of Martin Luther and James Baldwin in Fighting Racism," in *The Forgotten Luther II: Reclaiming the Church's Public Witness*, ed. Ryan P. Cumming (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 85-87.

difficult questions and suffering their answers. A non-exhaustive list of these questions would begin here. How has our particular congregation or seminary or synod silenced or minimized Black voices? How have we, as a congregation or synod, benefited from racism in its structural forms? Answering this question would require an audit of things like mortgages and loans from which our institutions have benefited. How do we begin or sustain genuine relationships across difference? What specific, concrete steps can be taken to repair damages wrought by racist structures and practices? What must we give up in order to do so?²⁹ Finally, what will we gain as Christians, as a result of this work? What forms of Christian community are possible as result of vocational suffering? From these questions, concrete plans should be made to address and repair actual need. Imagine the power of a group of congregations, joined with the like-minded, advocating for fairer housing policies or a more equitable funding of public schools. As noted above, this work is already beginning to take place. But we must add to and amplify that work. This work, I take it, is one way to listen to the Blues, to hear our actual neighbors' needs.

Conclusion

I have argued that, for Martin Luther, suffering is a necessary part of the Christian effort to love our neighbors as ourselves. Given the ELCA's demographic realities and the history of the United States, this suffering means that we need to hear the Blues and then act in concrete ways that address and ease actual pain. The work is difficult, painful. It requires repentance on a personal level and so changes to the way we live. It's also joyful, a means by which we are brought into deeper communion with our fellow humans and with our God. As Christians, what else would we desire?

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29. My thanks to Mary Shore for posing this question with respect to issues of racial justice.