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Caring for the Homeless with the Theology of the Cross: Roundtable Discussion Paper

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Title: Restoring Dignity in Homeless People through Teaching Identity in Christ

Introduction and Thesis

The majority of homeless people struggle with a sense of worthlessness, of feeling “less than” due to their circumstances and place in society. While the Church reaches out with holistic care, we are best equipped in providing Gospel comfort and reassurance of God’s promises to our homeless neighbors. In the care of souls, the Church points to each Christian’s identity in Christ in whom we are rooted. Indeed, the Church’s proclamation and affirmation of homeless people’s great worth in the eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ is central to their overall well-being and healing.

Particular Problems to be Addressed

- How to counsel someone who has begun to find her identity and worth in the progress she is making through various programming and in the “good” she is doing. That is, how to affirm the individual’s progress while pointing her to her identity in Christ through whom we grow and do good works.
- How to encourage the use of necessary medicine by a bipolar individual who is seeing the medication as a reminder that she is broken, “less than” and thus not taking it daily as needed.

Case Studies

1. Jennifer had been in the local homeless shelter for about 2 months when I first met her and began to mentor her. She is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict whose addiction led to her homelessness. The homeless shelter provides a variety of programming for residents such as Celebrate Recovery, Bible studies, outside mental health counseling, life skills classes, mentoring, assistance with job placement, etc. Jennifer participated in all available programming and felt as if she was making a lot of progress since she first arrived. And she was. While I did commend her for her sobriety and her enthusiastic participation in such worthwhile programming, I was concerned when I heard her state one day: “I used to feel worthless and depressed. Now I am finding worth and purpose in the good things I am doing.” This was a red flag to me, showing me that Jennifer was focusing too much on herself and needed to know and center her identity and worth in being Christ’s dear child. Jennifer was placing her identity and worth on a slippery slope. For when she would slip, she was bound to fall hard, shattering her new found worth in her good works. I then made a point in each mentoring session (once weekly) to share Scripture with Jennifer which anchors her identity in her Baptism into Christ.

Some of those Scriptures include:

- Isaiah 43:1-7
- Romans 3:21-24
- Ephesians 2:8-10
- Titus 3:3-7

Jennifer had attended a non-denominational church some as a youth and is Baptized. However, she lacked a correct understanding of Baptism and what it means to be a Baptized child of God. I used the above Scriptures to show her that she has great worth in God's eyes. She is His child whom He created, redeemed and for whom He has a purpose in this life. I especially pointed out that in Ephesians 2:10 the word "handiwork/workmanship" has the connotation of God as Artist and we His created as His work of art. I reminded her that God sees her as perfect through Christ's sacrifice on her behalf, and that God the Potter is at work throughout her lifetime shaping her more and more into the likeness of Christ. God's words brought tears to Jennifer's eyes as she began to see herself from His perspective. This shift in Jennifer's perspective took time as the Gospel message of her worth was repeated over and over again and had a chance to sink in—our mentoring sessions lasted ten months.

Because Jennifer was placing such an emphasis on her own good works/progress, I gently taught her that good works flow from faith, reminding her that Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches. We studied John 15:1-17, James 2, and Galatians 3:20.

Thus, our Lutheran confession on Baptism and Good Works which are centered on Christ helped Jennifer to shift her focus from herself and her works to Christ and what He has done and continues to do in and through her, His precious child.

2. Susan was also a resident in the local homeless shelter where I mentor. Susan struggles with Bipolar Disorder. She had been withdrawn and depressed and admitted to me one day that she was not taking her bipolar medication daily as she should. She told me that when it came time for her to take her medicine, the medicine reminded her that something was wrong with her, that she was broken, "less than." And so to avoid feeling that way Susan avoided taking her meds. This obviously was a downward spiral for Susan as she needed her medicine to function in society. Susan is a Baptized Christian and had been going to church and taking Communion regularly. So I tried to make a connection between Susan's spiritual and physical needs being met in Christ. I pointed out to her that we are all broken because of sin and that at church she was receiving the best medicine of all for her spiritual brokenness: God's Word of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ. I pointed to the fact that God was using the Church to provide Susan with His life-giving gifts. Then I made the connection that because we live in a fallen, imperfect world, we suffer various physical ailments but that God also gives us the gift of doctors and medicine to help heal or ease this brokenness. I emphasized that her bipolar medication is a First Article gift of God the Great Physician to her, His precious child. I pointed out that if she was regularly taking the Lord's Body and Blood in Communion which is spiritual medicine for her soul, then she could also take the gift of physical medicine for her mind because God cares for us in mind, body and spirit. I asked her to reflect on Jesus' many healing miracles in the Gospels, such as with Mary Magdalene. This emphasis on God's various spiritual and physical gifts helped changed Susan's perspective. It was like a light bulb turned on for Susan, and she agreed to take her medicine. She commented to me later that before she swallows her bipolar meds she now give thanks to the Lord for His "gifts."

Conclusion

Our Lutheran confession of faith, which is anchored in our Baptismal identity in Christ and always points to Jesus and His gifts of life and salvation, delivers comfort and hope to our homeless neighbors. Some of them may have been involved with the Church in their past, but the Reformed theology did not supply the comfort that the Theology of the Cross does. It is necessary for us to listen carefully and then to apply God's Word of truth so God can change perspectives and hearts. Let us never tire in sharing God's Word of hope, peace, joy and comfort to our homeless neighbors, for we know that His Word will not return to Him empty but will accomplish what He desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it (Isaiah 55:10).