

Serving the neighbor in charged times

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



These are politically charged times. This very sentence in the presiding bishop's column is likely to raise eyebrows.

Across this church I've heard stories of parishioners disturbed by the Gospel read on Sundays, believing the pastor chose the passage as a critique of the current administration. The Beatitudes seemed to provoke the most attention. In a way this is good—maybe we are all hearing Jesus' words with fresh ears. But really, the Beatitudes have been the appointed Gospel for the fourth Sunday of Epiphany (year A) for as long as we have been using the lectionary.

In these charged times it's helpful to consider two things: the relationship between church and state, and how Lutherans participate in civil society. Often we speak about the "separation of church and state." This principle is usually raised when parishioners feel the pastor (or the synod, churchwide organization or bishop) is being "political." There is the assumption that the church should only deal with the spiritual and that it should have nothing to do with civil and political life. The First Amendment says: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The separation of church and state is intended to protect religious liberty and keep the government from interfering in the church.

We Lutherans also cite Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms—the temporal and the spiritual. This has been misinterpreted to mean that the temporal realm is inferior to the spiritual realm—or that God, and therefore the faithful, should not be as concerned with the temporal, should not allow the temporal into the church, and really need not be too engaged in the public square.

But our understanding as Lutherans is that the church and the state, the spiritual and the temporal, are *both* established by God and are *both* part of God's twofold rule. When we pray, "Give

us today our daily bread," we are also praying that God send us the gift of good government (Luther's Small Catechism).

Both church and state are good gifts from God and have been established for specific purposes. The proper work of the church is to "preach the gospel in its purity and administer the sacraments according to the gospel" (Augsburg Confession IV). The proper work of the state is to keep peace and order and to support and nourish the lives of its citizens. And since we confess that God entered human life through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who took our flesh upon him, we do not have a hierarchy of value that places the spiritual above the temporal.

Active participation in public life and the duty of government to care for its people, especially the most vulnerable, have been part of the Lutheran movement from its beginning. In his explanation of the petition "Give us today our daily bread," Luther said: "It would be therefore fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread instead of a lion" (Large Catechism). He also wrote that the "second virtue of a prince is to help the poor, the orphans, and the widows to justice, and to further their cause."

Lutherans don't withdraw from public life. In fact our constitution pledges us to "work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction." Lutherans fulfill our baptismal vocation when we show up.

So why are we so tense? I think we've been influenced by a divisive culture. We forget that we are one people. I think we fail to recognize Christ in others, whether the other is across the pew or across the world. We forget that we all—whatever our politics—stand under the judgment of God and that only God's promise of reconciling love in Jesus can save us. Set free by that promise we can find a way to serve the neighbor. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.