

Covid's challenging invitations

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How has the pandemic impacted us? And how might this be instructive as we reflect on our identity and mission, and as we seek to witness to the love of God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

I reflect here from the perspective of my role in Identity and Formation for Lutheran Education Queensland, as a person deeply formed and nurtured in Lutheran community, and as a mother of young children looking expectantly towards the future...mine, theirs, ours.

Initially it seemed that amidst the deep fear and anxiety, we could see only the curse that Covid-19 was bringing to the world, to our world. But as the days and weeks have unfolded, our experiences have been strangely mixed. Connection, disconnection. Anxiety, relief. Pain, joy.

Some say this will be a blip on the horizon in no time, but it is my conviction that this is an opportunity to look with greater clarity at some of the challenges we have known are there, but have not yet fully engaged. Covid-19 has brought into focus a confluence of realities which God is inviting us to open our hearts and lives to. As we consider the challenges which have been laid out more clearly than ever, we could think of these challenges as they exist for the Lutheran community in Australia, or we could think of them as challenges being faced on the global stage and then consider how we as members of the body of Christ might respond to them.

The first challenge which Covid-19 has brought clearly into focus I have named the *technological challenge*. Everywhere during this period of isolation, technology has been both critical to enabling our functioning, but found wanting in terms of enabling us to be fully human. The reality of our interdependence has been amplified both as members of humanity, and as creatures, part of God's whole creation. This reality and the painful failures to live positively into this interdependence, for me presents itself as the second challenge of *sustainability*—economically, ecologically and for us, as a community with a Lutheran identity and mission. What has also become unavoidable is the reality of the incredible pain people are experiencing because of systemic inequities, marginalisation and injustice. I have named this third focus the *diversity* challenge.

In thinking about, defining and discussing each of these challenges, it is my hope that together we will return again and again to reflecting on the nature of God, wrestling with the challenges and walking forward in new ways with hope.

To help me think about these challenges, I tried to define a key question for each of them. Drawing on the work of Ann Milliken Pederson¹ the first question is, *how will we live*

¹ Ann Milliken Pederson, *The Geography of God's Incarnation: Landscapes and Narratives of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

humanly in the techno sapien age? The second question, *how will we be good stewards in 2020?* gets at the sustainability challenge. The third question, *how will we love our neighbours in 2020?* addresses the challenge of diversity. Together these challenges or questions sit under a broader question about what it might look like to live into God's Shalom in 2020.

Challenge One! Pederson suggests that we are techno sapiens...that we function as people continuously connected to technology in such a way that it is an extension of ourselves. And certainly, during Covid, being online has been integral to the functioning of education, business and...church. We have all seen this technology 'work'. In fact, businesses everywhere seem to be considering how this might impact functioning into the future. But what about schools? What about pastoral care? And what about church? Apart from the practicalities about what works and doesn't work, all of a sudden pastors and others in ministry have been left asking what their job now looks like, what will happen to church finances, and is this more bad news for churches already struggling with changing demographics.

A discussion of the joys and pitfalls of technology scratches at the surface of a much richer question about the kinds of gatherings and interactions which enable us to be more fully human, to live fully into being the creatures God has made us to be. Made in the image of a relational God or as Richard Rohr² would say, relationship itself, I would like to consider how this might be instructive for us. What do we know of this trinitarian relationship? What do we know about healthy, flourishing relationships? And what might this have to say about the post-Covid future for us?

Lutheran Education Queensland's [Service Learning Framework](#) is one expression I am familiar with which seeks to describe and support dimensions of just such relational ways of being. Foundational concepts of the framework include a declaration of the innate dignity of every person, alongside an acknowledgement that every person has a story, neither good nor bad, but a story that just is. Concepts which speak particularly to our way of being in relationships include stewardship and the notion that when we encounter the other, we seek to 'come as guest'. A deep commitment to reciprocity in relationships flows out of these foundational concepts about the human person.

I would like to commend the framework as being instructive for us during this time of reflection on the Covid world, but in this discussion of technology, my first focus is on reciprocity and mutuality in relationship. We have in our Trinitarian God this beautiful image of loving relationship, of mutual indwelling and identity of the one God mysteriously found in the three.

A key pitfall of technologically mediated interaction has been the monologue or the uni-directional communication. It should come as no surprise to us that as relational creatures we yearn for relational ways of being, we thrive when there is true dialogue, when all parties have an opportunity to give and receive, when there is deep reciprocity. Beyond relationships of exchange or influence, reciprocity at an even deeper level becomes

² Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2016).

generative, a collaborative way of being where transformation of ways of knowing and being may come about.

And for me, here's where the going gets challenging. How do our Lutheran communities live into this? What have your online experiences been like? For that matter, what are our other experiences of being together like? When and how have you experienced reciprocity? When have gatherings been collaboratively generative? I love Henri Nouwen. He says we encounter Christ in the other.³ Do our gatherings reflect this belief?

A second dimension of being human which has come starkly into focus for many of us is that physical distancing has pained us beyond what we might have imagined. From the New King James version which I grew up with, a verse from Hebrews says, '[do not] forsak[e] the assembling of yourselves together...' (Heb 10:25 NKJV). A more modern translation⁴ says, '...let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together...' These days I consider this verse something of an instruction about how to be a human being. [In an interview](#) with Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, John Hare, Yale Professor of Philosophical Theology, emphasised *being with*... He said, '...Jesus came to be *with* us...*Emmanuel*...and that is what we have lost...we can't take Eucharist...a good life is one in which we have physical continuity with others...'

I was struck by this notion of 'witness'. We are creatures with bodies who need to be physically with one another. Do we fully embrace this truth? Do we live into it at every opportunity? I wonder, do we intentionally break bread with one another often enough? Do we dialogue often about how technology is serving us in our humanness? Do we spend enough time physically together in God's creation acknowledging that this is one critical way God nurtures us?

Challenge Two! For the Lutheran community to live sustainably, I simply mean that it can flourish now and in the future. Covid-19 has brought this question into sharper focus because of the sudden changes in the way churches have had to function, but also because the pandemic is having such a large scale economic impact that we can only wonder what things will look like in six months, a year or two years down the track. From an economic perspective, Covid has also brought to our attention that even in a 'rich western country', if you are old, poor and coloured, you are more likely to die from this virus. Tied to these discussions of economic sustainability, we are not able to ignore the planet's sigh as we ceased production, driving, flying...and all of a sudden people could see the sky, the mountains and a clear horizon. Sustainability as discussed here also refers to the ability of our Lutheran community to nurture and strengthen our identity so we can live and serve from this space.

So what does it mean for us to be good stewards in 2020? For me questions of economy and ecology cannot be separated. Are we living beyond our means? I mean to say, are we living beyond the means of the planet to provide for the needs of the whole world, human and non-human? How would you define the economic and ecological reality which is facing our world? We all know about a finite planet, a finite budget and a past trajectory

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Jesus: A Gospel* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

⁴ Heb 10:24–25 NRSV.

of unsustainable resource usage, or 'infinite market growth'. Do we need a new mindset if we are to be good stewards of our fiscal and ecological 'resources' in 2020?

Consider John's telling of the feeding of the five thousand. When the people were hungry and Jesus' disciple found a boy with five loaves and two fish, Jesus broke bread and told everyone to sit down on the grass...there was no building, no chairs, no plates,...but they were filled.... We too have our loaves and fishes to share. God is the one who invites all to the table with no exceptions and makes sure there is enough...in fact there is abundance. There were after all twelve baskets of leftover food collected! Have our definitions of abundance become confused? Misdirected?

Recently as I drove through a beautifully hilly older suburb of Brisbane, I was struck by the appearance of a large white concrete cube-like church building. Whatever the reality is of how that building is used I have no idea, but the image has haunted me as I have pondered the big picture of the global economy, and the relatively small picture of the financial health of our Lutheran communities. This image of 'a dead white building' captures the ecological challenge too as we wrestle with co-creating the environments in which we live whilst at the same time discovering through story and through research that God's creation is a key source of our physical, mental and spiritual wellness.

Are we hanging on to monoliths of any kind which don't serve us and our communities? Are we taking up too much space? Have we forgotten that God's abundance comes to us when we simply break bread with one another?

As we think about the question of the stewardship of ourselves as members of Lutheran communities called by God to serve, what might it mean to do this well in 2020? Theologian James K. A. Smith speaks about the practices which are forming us as people.⁵ It is my belief and hope that when we practice our faith by engaging continuously in living out the calling to be the relational, embodied creatures God has made us to be, and by taking up the mandate to steward God's world, we are growing and nurturing the very identity God has given us. The miraculous abundance demonstrated in the story of the feeding of the five thousand is God's to unleash in the whole world.

Challenge three! How will we live with our neighbours in 2020? Whilst the #BlackLivesMatter movement in some ways has nothing to do with Covid, we have found ourselves during this challenging time confronted with diversity, that our realities as human beings so often do not match those of our neighbours, and that even in western democratic countries, justice or Shalom seems out of reach for many people.

Here in Australia it seems that many of us don't even know about the historic massacres of our own First Nations people. And if we have heard a whisper about these atrocities, we're pretty sure it has nothing to do with us. We also know that Apostle Paul said, '[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...' (Gal 3:28). But is this reality?

How is our community being invited to grow in loving our neighbours? Deep reciprocity must be at the heart of how we live with our neighbours in 2020.

⁵ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

If it is true to say and we believe that God's mission has a church, then we acknowledge that God is at work in a myriad of ways...and whilst we take up the invitation to share God's good news that we have heard and experienced in our own lives, we are also invited to listen intently for God at work beyond our own experiences, categories and imaginations. We must recognise our voices as one in conversation. [Miguel De La Torre](#), an Hispanic American theologian, says that it is only when we invite and listen to every voice speaking about God's voice to them in scripture that we have a full and rich understanding of God's message to humanity. Rachel Held Evans says, 'the New Testament is about...the good news of Jesus told from multiple perspectives—"the gospel according to..."'.⁶

If we truly believe that we are all made in God's image, that *out of the mouths of babes*, that the Samaritan really is good, that there is neither Jew nor Greek...then let us intentionally avoid the monologue. Let us intentionally invite dialogue, listening and learning.

Let God's world be the stage on which we gather with all our brothers and sisters to be fed by God's abundance.

Grounded in a deep theology of vocation, our schools have been explicitly committed to enabling our young people to explore their own voices and sing their own songs. These days we draw on the wisdom of the global educational community to consider again and again how we might responsively live into the emerging needs and opportunities for our young people.

What marginalised voices are we being invited to sit and learn from? Where are there opportunities for me, for us, to seek reciprocity, to seek truly human relationships? How might we live with our indigenous brothers and sisters, our land, our pacific neighbours in solidarity, listening, learning, and working together, seeing and hearing Christ in the face and story of the other? What would it mean if we were to come as guest, ready to see and hear God's grace at work in the life of every person we encountered? How can our schools live more fully into their mission to invite young people to see, hear and participate in God's mission for the world?

I have recently become fascinated with stories about the [tiny house movement](#). These stories have resonated with me on many levels as everyday people wrestle with many of the challenges I have discussed. I would like to leave you with a few reflections about tiny house people.

One room dwellings, often with open lofts for sleeping areas, tiny houses are just that, tiny. Tiny house people ask the question 'what do I really need?' Tiny house designers and owners are concerned about living within their economic and ecological means. They draw on ingenuity, technology, and creativity to build beautiful and nurturing homes with as little as possible.

Tiny inside, they often put lots of time and effort into thinking about how to enjoy and be nurtured by all that their natural environment has to offer. There is often a sense that it is

⁶ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water & Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 152.

in the outdoors that they can be hospitable and connect with others. People with tiny homes often live on land which belongs to other people, prioritising sharing and community.

Tiny house people listen and learn. They are open to new ideas from diverse places...they see the challenges of technology, stewardship and diversity as an opportunity to rethink, reimagine, and re-member what it means to be a human being.

We are creatures, made in the image of a relational, incarnational God!

These three challenges of living humanly in the technological age, of stewardship or sustainability, and of diversity, brought into focus by Covid-19, sit squarely for me in what I believe we as followers of Jesus Christ are called to wrestle with as we seek to live into God's love as revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I hope you will join me as recipients of God's Grace, as members of the human family, as stewards of God's world and as one voice among many in the conversation, the reflection on practice, and the commitment to respond to these challenges as God calls.

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