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Beware of the Lutherans: Darrow and the danger of labeling

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Study guide:

Beware of the Lutherans

Darrow and the danger of labeling

By Robert C. Blezard

Labels have their place. Grocery stores, for instance. A good label gives you information that helps you find the best product to meet your nutritional needs or to satisfy your appetite. But labels aren't so good for human beings, who defy uniformity of standards and description. God made us individuals in all our wonder and diversity. Can we appreciate that better?

Exercise 1: Scapegoat theory

Social scientists point to “scapegoat theory” to help describe prejudice against and oppression of others, usually by an advantaged group against a disadvantaged one. It holds that, especially in times of hardship or scarcity, one group will put the blame for their problems on another group. (For instance, the Holocaust resulted after Jews were scapegoated for Germany's social and economic woes following World War I.)

In what other cultures, events or instances have you seen the “scapegoat theory” in practice? Why does it work? What is it about human nature that desires people to blame and oppress? How does our Christian faith inspire and call us to do better?

In today's political discourse, what problems are sometimes ascribed to immigrants (especially those who are illegal), non-English speakers, government workers, the poor, nonwhites, union members, those who need public assistance, members of the lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender community, Muslims, non-Christians, others? How would scapegoat theory explain the vitriolic language used toward them? What is a proper response? In addition to not participating in it, how can we help deter others from scapegoating?

Exercise 2: The Eighth Commandment

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther explained the commandment to not bear false witness against one's neighbor in this way: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light” (*The Book of Concord*, page 353; Fortress Press, 2000).



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- How would you apply Luther's commentary to the political debates going on in our nation this campaign season?
- Looking at news reports of political campaigns, as well as advertisements, come up with as many examples as you can of potentially false, misleading, slanderous, reputation-destroying statements that were made. Check out the truthfulness of those statements or advertisements on reputable fact-checking websites.
- On reputable fact-checking websites, compare the ratings of candidates on the degree to which they speak truthfully. What does it reveal?
- Given Luther's commentary, why is it a sin when candidates, politicians or campaigns knowingly speak untruthfully about an individual or group of people? Why is it a sin if you, as a follower of a candidate, pass along information (verbally or via email) that contains false, misleading, slanderous or reputation-destroying statements?
- How can we encourage our culture to follow Luther's advice to speak well of our neighbors and interpret everything they do in the best possible light?

Exercise 3: Jesus' acceptance

Since Paul teaches us that it was in Jesus that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19), then Jesus should give us a good idea of how God looks at the diversity of people in our world. In the gospels, Jesus ignored the world's labels for people that were intended to demean or exclude them. For each of the following examples, look at the label, it's intent and meaning in its time and culture, and how Jesus responded to it:

- **Sinner:** Luke 7:36-47, Matthew 9:10-13.
- **Tax collector:** Mark 2:14.
- **Prostitutes:** Matthew 21:31-32.
- **Leper:** Luke 17:11-17.
- **Samaritan:** John 4, Luke 10:25-37.
- **Criminal:** Luke 23:39-43.

What does Jesus' behavior indicate? As followers of Jesus, what are we to do? Be?

Exercise 4: Mystery of fingerprints

Using watercolor markers or simple paints, make a fingerprint or two of every member of the study group and pass them around. Looking at



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the intricate whirls and lines, ponder that no two fingerprints are the same—even for twins who are in every other way identical. Discuss:

- What do the fingerprints have in common? How can you tell them apart? Is it easy?
- Besides in their fingerprints, are any two people exactly alike?
- In what other ways are people uniquely individual?
- What are the things that distinguish you as an individual?

Exercise 5: Sticks and stones ...

The old childhood rhyme goes: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” But is it true? Explain. Share an experience when you or someone you cared for was hurt by name-calling. How do names dehumanize and wound individuals? How do they separate and divide communities?

In the experience you shared, what was the name-caller’s intention? Why do schoolyard bullies use names as a weapon: ignorance, hatred or something else? When names are used by grown-ups, what is the intent? For politicians?

What advice do we give to our children and grandchildren when they encounter a name-calling bully? What advice should we give to ourselves and our friends about the name-calling bullies in the public eye?

Exercise 6: Classification

No matter what your racial or ethnic heritage, your country of origin or residence, your gender or your sexual orientation, it’s guaranteed that some people have worked to classify you—lump you in with others of “your type” who have characteristics they don’t like. Using your experience or researching online, what are some negative things that have been said about white people, African-Americans, Asians and American Indians?

What negative comments have been said about people from New York, California, Texas, Florida, Nebraska, West Virginia, Maine, Oregon or Washington, D.C.? People from England, France, Germany, Norway, Syria, Liberia, Egypt, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Japan, Canada, the United States, Mexico or Colombia? Comments about heterosexual men, homosexual women, bisexual and transgender people?

Why are negative attributes harmful when applied universally to individuals in a group? Why are they unfair? What purpose do they serve?

Perspective

Beware OF THE Lutherans:

Clarence Darrow, arguably one of the most famous attorneys in the 20th century, wrote an article for *Esquire* titled “How to pick a jury.” Here’s my favorite quote: “Beware of the Lutherans, especially the Scandinavians; they are almost always sure to convict. Either a Lutheran or a Scandinavian is unsafe, but if both in one, plead your client guilty and go down the docket.”

Darrow also rants about people who are rich, poor, Irish, English, German, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Unitarian, Universalist, Congregationalist, Jewish, agnostic, prohibitionist, Christian Scientist, men who laugh and, finally, women (who at this point in history had only recently gained entrance to the jury box).

His wit was rapier sharp and though the words seem quaint and humorous today, his assessment regarding people of faith was withering and reductive then.

In this election year, we’re in the jury box once again, being asked as citizens to choose our next batch of public servants. As Lutherans, we rightly rail against the idea of the church hierarchy instructing us how to vote. It’s in poor taste and unconstitutional (and merits the loss of our tax-exempt status).

As a pastor of seemingly good conscience, I find myself in the position of bringing the gospel to bear on our discernment process without actually endorsing a candidate. I have a favorite, of course,

but I would betray the covenant of my ordination if I were to share this opinion from the pulpit.

Once in a great while, however, a candidate comes along who manages to strike a nerve among people, using rhetoric that maligns others and categorizes people according to issues of race, nationality, religion and so forth. Our temptation is to dismiss or ridicule the candidate and his or her supporters, which lowers us to their reductionist standards.

This year’s election process has such a candidate. Like Darrow, he freely shares his opinions about others, painting them with a painfully broad brush, reducing them to the worst possible stereotypes. Years from now, history will probably paint him as a showman whose charisma and vapid policy points could whip crowds into a frenzy. His words will seem quaint, even humorous. Today, they are nothing short of incendiary.

As a pastor it’s not for me to tell people how to vote, but what about candidates who stir up hate and fear, directly contradicting the message of our Lord Jesus Christ?

The church is called to refute those movements that seek to harm others. Jesus shows us time after time that he stands in solidarity with the outcasts and the disenfranchised. Being the church is about being called to discern, witness and act appropriately when the rhetoric of fear threatens to stifle the good news of God’s reign, whether in the voting booth or in backyard conversations with our neighbor. Our

Called to prayer: For resources to help us heed our call to conversation and prayer around our role as U.S. residents and as people of faith in ensuring our election systems promote dignity and respect for all, visit elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAVotes.



Darrow AND THE danger OF labeling

silence during such times of fearmongering is all too often interpreted as complicity.

Let's revisit Darrow and his lopsided view of Lutherans for a moment. Some of us may fit this description. Some of us—hopefully most—do not. The flaw in Darrow's seemingly tongue-in-cheek rhetoric was that he associated attributes to an *entire* group based on one or two defining characteristics. We are Lutheran, *ergo*, we will find the client guilty. I won't deny my Lutheranism, but I will get my dander up if anyone makes an assumption about me based on my baptism. Labels are highly dangerous. They can be used to dehumanize and ostracize.

This isn't to say we should ignore differences. They exist, thanks be to God. The world is a dappled place where innumerable cultures, beliefs, ethnicities, orientations, affiliations, folklore and traditions glorify God with their varied splendor.

Because of sin and our human brokenness, however, we fall into fear from time to time. Yes, individuals among us do awful, horrible things to others. This is no basis for assuming that others who fit the same description are going to do the same.

We draw lines in the sand and build walls in our hearts. Or, as we used to say in confession, "We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." This is a sickness that leads to xenophobia, racism, disenfranchisement, gender bias, exploitation, objectification and, ultimately, condemnation. It is a sickness that is most dangerous when it infects people

who have the means to create a public agenda.

David Wellman, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, defines prejudice as "a system of advantage based on race." It's the collective voice of prejudice in society that causes corruption in all aspects of our public policy and discourse.

The church can and must counteract this sickness with words of reason and compassion. This is what it means to speak prophetically, and we must continue to do so until the prophetic word becomes the normative word at home, church and in the elected office.

Consider these words from 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

Many of us are wrestling with fear, the world around us seemingly on the verge of chaos. The omnipresent media is delivering messages that play to our anxieties. It's good for ratings, but bad for the better angels of our nature.

The writer of 1 John also exhorts us to "test the spirits" in order to discern whether voices speak truth to power or cower behind false prophecies. We must discern and act according to our hope in Christ, not our fear of death. Though we might not see it clearly, God *is* turning the world around, and love *will* have the final word. Thanks be to God. **L**

For a study guide, find this article at LivingLutheran.org.



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Photo illustration doesn't reflect the political views of those pictured.

