

Dear People of Nazareth Lutheran Church,

Thank you for your deep concern for the church. Neither I, nor the ELCA espouses universalism which is a general philosophical belief that everyone is saved without regard to God's promise of mercy in Jesus Christ and confident trust or faith in that promise. I and the ELCA, however, join all Lutheran churches in the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions that "the promise of the gospel is *universalis* (universal)." Christ commanded that this promise be proclaimed to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20): because God loves the world (John 3:16); because Christ's atoning sacrifice for the whole world (1 John 2:2); and because God has mercy on all (Romans 11:32). See the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, article XI.28 for more Biblical references for this teaching.

This confident and joyful trust that the promise of the gospel is universal follows the teaching of the Augsburg Confession that Christ alone saves human beings freely, as a gift, that is, by grace alone through faith alone. The ELCA's official confession of Faith states, "This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe."

I and the ELCA affirm that this teaching – "that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith (Augsburg Confession, art. IV) - is the Biblical witness concerning salvation. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). This teaching is so important for understanding every other teaching that the Lutheran Confessions call it "the doctrine on which the church stands or falls" and the lens through which all of Scripture is read and interpreted.

This universal promise of the gospel, proclaimed by Scripture and taught by the Lutheran Confessions, gives great hope and joy to Christians. It engenders a confident trust in God- that is, a living faith. Out of this joyful confidence in God, and trusting in the promise of God's mercy in Christ, I and many Christians, hope that at the end of time God will redeem all things, including all humankind in the new heaven and new earth that is promised (Revelation 21:1-5). This hope based in the universal scope of Christ's saving work is not *universalism* – a belief based on a philosophical idea rather than a confident trust in God's free promise in Jesus Christ.

This is God's work, not ours. Is Hell empty? God alone knows. I take great comfort in St. Paul's assertion "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

I pray that God continues to strengthen your witness and ministry so that more people might know this love of Christ and be filled with hope.

In Christ,
Elizabeth A. Eaton