

Dear Reader:

Due to some controversy generated by a local pastor's article in *The Huron County View* concerning the Culture of Death and the issue of suicide, I thought it might be helpful to reprint this study (in condensed form – the full study is on our website) that I did for one of the Higher Things Youth Conferences. While Rev. Barsaleau's article was, I thought, generally well done, there were some "gaps" in it that may have left people with the wrong impression if they didn't read his article carefully. Because suicide is such an emotional issue, I don't want this to be seen as a criticism of Rev. Barsaleau's article, but simply a clarification of his otherwise valid points. Because of the length of this article, there will be no *Der Antwort Mann* column this month.

Pastor Lueke

"BY THEIR OWN HANDS"

A Brief Look at the Issue of Suicide and the Christian

2010 Higher Things Youth Gathering Nashville, Tennessee

CAN A CHRISTIAN COMMIT SUICIDE? WHY?

The causes of suicide are not just physical or emotional/mental. There is also a spiritual side to it that often goes unrecognized. Not simply that there is a loss of faith leading to suicide (for that's not always the case), but there are also spiritual forces at work attempting to destroy that which God loves and has redeemed in Christ.

Ephesians 6:12 *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."*

1 Peter 5:8 *"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*

John 8:44 *"[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth."*

Large Catechism, Seventh Petition of the Lord's Prayer *"Since the devil is not only a liar, but also a murderer, he constantly seeks our life. He wreaks his vengeance whenever he can afflict our bodies with misfortune and harm. Therefore, it happens that he often breaks men's necks or drives them to insanity, drowns some, and moves many to commit suicide and to many other terrible disasters."*

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR THE ONE WHO COMMITS SUICIDE TO GO TO HEAVEN?

While taking one's own life is murder, thus a sin against the 5th Commandment, it does not necessarily follow that every person committing suicide is eternally condemned. Due to the weakness of our flesh, even as Christians, we might die in the midst of numerous sins without having the opportunity to repent specifically of those offenses. Would we be lost because of that, in spite of the fact of our Baptism, and subsequent Spirit-generated faith in Christ? Of course not. Salvation is not based on our specific repentance for each sin, but on faith in Christ. Where there is true faith in Christ, however weak, there is true salvation, even in the case of suicide.

Isaiah 43:1, 3 *"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold, My Chosen, in whom My soul delights . . . a bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench."*

Mark 9:24 *"Immediately the father of the child cried out and said '[Lord] I believe; help my unbelief!'"*

John 3:16-18a *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned."*

Luther's Works, Vol. 54, #222 *"I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber . . . Magistrates should treat them quite strictly, although it is not plain that their souls are damned. However, they are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples, we would not fear God. Hence, He must teach us in this way."*

Luther takes care in saying this, lest it look like he is giving permission for people to commit suicide:

"However, this ought not to be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause

slaughter, and I recommend the popular custom be strictly adhered to according to which it (the suicide's corpse) was not carried over the threshold, etc. [that is, given the honor that is shown to the body of one who has died by other means]."

DEALING WITH THE GUILT

Inevitably, family and friends are filled with guilt when someone they know commits suicide. "Why didn't I recognize the signs?" "Why didn't I stop them?" "What did I do to make them do such a thing?" These, and many similar questions haunt those left behind.

The fact remains that, while many suicides are preventable, there are a certain percentage of people who will take their own lives, no matter what. Ultimately, they, not you, are responsible for their decision to live or die.

For those who are dealing with guilt over their (real or perceived) failure to stop a suicide, it is critical to take hold of the forgiveness that Christ won for all (including you) at the cross. Though the guilt in these cases is a heavy burden, especially if you really could have prevented the suicide but didn't, Christ bore that burden and sin on Himself. You are forgiven. Trust God's Word and promise for you in Christ. Trust what He gave you, and made you in Holy Baptism. Come to the Lord's Table and receive Christ's true body and blood "given and shed *for you* for the forgiveness of sins."

You may also want to consider Private Confession and Absolution with your pastor. By confessing your guilt, and hearing personally God's word of forgiveness spoken to you by your pastor, you can then begin to leave whatever guilt is yours behind, and move forward in life in the grace you have received in Christ.

WAYS OF DEALING WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

- Don't remain alone. Seek out family or friends to be with when these kinds of thoughts overwhelm you.
- Look for constructive ways of helping others, so that you don't focus so much on yourself and your problems.
- Contact a suicide hot line, such as Lifeline: 1.800.273-TALK
- Are you on medication? Talk to your doctor, as some medications have side-effects that could possibly cause suicidal thoughts. Conversely, if you suffer chronic depression, get a doctor's help, and take prescribed medications for it.
- Don't listen to dark and depressing music, especially that which has suicidal themes, while you are having these thoughts yourself.
- Talk to your pastor, and make regular use of the Means of Grace (The Gospel and Holy Communion) for the strength to resist the devil's temptations to end your life.
- Keep reminding yourself from Scripture that you belong to Christ; that He is with you through whatever bad things are happening; that by His death, all your sins are forgiven, and you are loved by God; that your life is not yours to take, but by Holy Baptism, your life belongs to Christ, and He is living out His life through you.
- Remember, also, that time gives perspective. When you are young, a week or a month seems like "forever." It is not. The sorrows you are currently experiencing will not last. Even if you will be dealing with these things potentially for years, it will pass. God will use even the bad stuff to bring about great good for you. That is His promise in Christ.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Suicide is sin. It should never be considered as an "option" for Christians. Don't be tempted to "play the odds" thinking that suicide is not really damning. Many (not all!) take their lives *because* they have lost faith and, sadly, end all chances for eternal life that God wants them to have.

Life and death belong to God. When we take our own lives, we are playing God and undermining His will for our lives.

Suicide is permanent. There is no "Respawn."

Committing suicide to punish a boyfriend or girlfriend who has dumped you is stupid. They will go on to date someone else and get married and forget about you. You will be dead.

No matter how bad things are with your parents, friends, or school, God has promised to use those things ultimately for good for those who trust in Him. Examples: Joseph in Egypt; David's struggles with King

Saul; St. Paul's travails in his mission work; most importantly, Christ's death for sinners. Be active in receiving the gifts God gives you in church. Be regular in attendance at The Divine Service. It will be His Word and Supper that will sustain, strengthen, and keep you connected to Christ, and connected to His life in you.

RESOURCES

Collect For Peace:

O, God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Your commandments and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

John 10:27 – 28 “[Jesus said] My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”

Romans 5:1 – 11 “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance...character...and hope...while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Deuteronomy 30:19 – 20 “Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him, for He is your life and length of days.”