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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible, Theology Learned and
Lived.

We're exploring the ways in which
theology permeates all aspects of life.
Through conversations with faculty at
Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will
challenge you
to deepen your theology and live out your
faith in Christ.

I'm your producer and host, Jessica
Bordeleau.

I'll talk with a variety of professors on
a variety of topics, something different
every

episode, but all pointing to the
intersection of faith and daily life,
because it's Tangible:

Theology is Learned and Lived.

Today we're taking a new look at the 16th
century theologian, Martin Luther.

We are exploring the Luther that
Lutherans never knew.

You usually just think of him as a
stalwart reformer who stood his ground,
but his struggles
with severe depression informed an
entirely different aspect of his
ministry.

Here to talk about it is Dr. Steven Pietsch.

He's the author of the book of Good
Comfort, Martin Luther's Letters to the
Depressed and

Their Significance for Pastoral Care
Today.

Dr. Pietsch is Associate Professor of
Practical Theology here at Concordia
Seminary St. Louis.

Before coming to the States, Dr. Pietsch served at Australian Lutheran College as a professor and director of pastoral formation. He has 20 years of experience as a parish pastor and earned his PhD at Flinders University. Much of his work has been researched into Luther's care for people with depression. Dr. Pietsch, welcome to the show.

Steven: Thanks, Jessica.
It's great to be here.

Jessica: I'd also like to welcome Dr. Jason Lane. Dr. Lane is Associate Professor of Historical Theology and the Director of Research, Assessment, and Academic Programming here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He earned his undergraduate degree in psychology and is Doctor of Theology at the University of Hamburg in Germany. He has experience as a pastor and as a theology professor at Concordia University, Wisconsin. Go Falcons. Dr. Lane, welcome to the show.

Jason: Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jessica: So, Dr. Pietsch, you wrote that you've been reading Martin Luther's mail for a long time. How did that start?

Steven: When I was a new professor in Australia back in 2008, I became close to a lot of my students in a small seminary, much smaller than Concordia. Professors you tend to get very close to

your students and anyway I had this group of students, three or four of them, who were suffering with depression.

Around that time, there was this book that came back into publication after being out of print for a long time and that was Tappet's book, and I see Dr. Lane's got a copy of it sitting here, Tappet's book, Luther, Letters of Spiritual Counsel.

This was first published back in the early 1950s, I think, and then went out of print for a long time and then suddenly came back into print.

I got a copy of it and I was reading it. There's a whole section in this book of Luther's letters to people who are anxious and despondent.

If you know anything about depression, you quickly read those letters and you realise

he's talking to people who are depressed.

So I handed over these letters to these students and I said, hey, read this.

And they came back to me with this incredible reaction.

They said, these letters read to us as though somebody just actually understands our experience from the inside.

But they found Luther's sort of implicit understanding of the experience of depression very helpful and also his spiritual advice and his insight about the spiritual dimension of mental illness

and how you can and how your faith supports you and strengthens you in all contexts in life, but in the context of mental illness.

God's word, God's promises, God's grace are very powerful.

So that's how I started reading Luther's mail.

After I started reading those letters, I adopted this as my PhD research.

And I went looking all through Luther's letters in the Weimar edition, searching, and I found that there were 21 of these letters that he'd written to people with anxiety slash depression.

And some of them weren't in English.

That's incredible to me.

We got these wonderful things from Luther and it's not in English yet.

So I had to translate some of them.

And yeah, so I found all these treasures and they're theological historical treasures,

but also pastoral treasures because they speak into, even after 500 years, they speak into the texture and context of our daily life.

They really are lived theology.

They really are theology out of the reality of Luther's daily existence as a professor and pastor, and drawing in the daily struggle of people who are fighting with this illness and other people as well.

And this is what you find is that when you read Luther's mail, you get a dose of real life as a Christian,

living under the word of God in all sorts of different contexts and struggles.

So Luther says that the devil sort of operates like a mosquito who's buzzing around in the room where you are, and he's looking for an opportunity to bite you or get you scratching.

He's like an insect or a bug and he's constantly at us all the time.

And I think this is a dimension of

spiritual reality that we need to bring back into pastoral conversation with people.

And it's one of the things that sometimes when I put this in front of students here,

I get a bit of a surprised reaction until we start talking about the biblical dimension of it all, and then they see how practical this is.

Jason: So what you were saying reminds me a bit of the way that Luther research goes about dealing with Luther.

How do you get at the person?

So is it Luther trying to figure out how to have a gracious God, or is there some other theme that we might place in that?

And I find it, I'm always struck by this when I turn to Augustine's Confessions, who was a big influence on Luther, certainly in those teen years, 15 teens, 15, 13 to 17,

and of course that was his order.

But when Augustine says that my heart is restless, oh Lord, until it rests in you, that is an experience that Christians have and I think is very acutely the issue for Luther.

He just simply can't find rest for his soul in the working of the monastic life, and the order, and the law, and the expectations of a righteous judge.

But I think it's also the experience of most Christians.

If we're able to say, why am I so restless?

So how does an individual come to find rest and a place where the conscience is no longer stirred up,

the devil's not able to aggravate, and I think this is what Luther ends up looking

for,
rightly in the Holy Scriptures and in the
promises of Christ.

Steven: So he's always looking to proclaim the
gospel to people's lives and hearts.
I'm just wondering if this is a good
moment for me to talk about a particular
letter in a particular situation,
which I think just chimes right in with
what you've been talking about, Jason.
In 1544, Luther wrote a letter to his
friend Spalatin, it's on page 273 of my
book.
And in this letter, Luther's writing to
an old friend,
George Spalatin, who's become a canon in
the cathedral at Altenburg,
and he's just made a very big mistake.
He's given wrong advice to somebody about
marriage.
I won't go into all the details.
It's all tied up with the legal
requirements about marriage in Saxony at
that time.
So Spalatin, who's been a kind of a
court chancellor, a brilliant man in many
ways,
takes this very hard, and he goes into a
deep depression over it, actually.
He's deeply humiliated.
And Luther writes to him in 1544 because
he's actually becoming so depressed about
this
that he's becoming physically ill.
And Luther writes to him and he says,
he says, are you the only man whose sin
is such that there is no longer a high
priest
who was able to sympathize with our
weaknesses?
Surely you do not believe that it is so
remarkably new for a person living in the

flesh
and surrounded by the fiery darts of so
many devils to at some point be wounded
or even laid low.
You seem to me to be a man who was not
experienced in wrestling against sin,
conscience, and the law.
Or perhaps Satan has snatched away from
you and your sight and memory all of the
time prepared for battle by the work and
benefits of Christ.
He goes on and says, look, mate, do you
think you're the only person who's made a
big mistake in life?
God's gracious.
He says to him, therefore, I beg you,
join us truly great and hard-boiled
sinners
so that you do not diminish Christ for
us, who is not a saviour for imaginary or
trivial sins,
but rather for real sins, not only for
small ones, but great ones.
Yes, even the worst.
In fact, for all sins committed by all
people.
So Luther, a lot of his letters of
comfort and his letters generally are
full of this kind of
here is God's grace and forgiveness.
Take it on board, make it your own.
Let it take root in you so that you grow
in faith and confidence in Christ and his
work.
So that's just a wonderful example.
And I love this idea.
You think you've got sins?
Well, let me tell you.

Jason: I can't remember who he's writing.
I think he's writing to a prince back in
the late twenties.
And he says something along the same

lines.

It seems as if you're new to this bearing
crosses and suffering and feeling
horrible
and as if you alone are the most
miserable.

And he says, that's OK.

You're not going to get it away by your
effort.

You're not going to move the cross away
from yourself.

And you're certainly not going to remove
your own sin.

And so there's also this sigh of relief.

Oh, I'm not expected to be the one who
can overcome all this.

And so this is the way that Luther very
often diagnosed, usually with some sort
of joke

to lighten the mood, too, of saying, how
dare you, you know, as he says here,
how dare you take away our comfort
because yours is so great.

Your your sorrow is so great.

And he does that very often in his
letters.

Steven: If you look at some of his advice, at
times you think,
Luther, how can you possibly be so
certain of that?
You know, he says, oh, this is the devil,
you know.
Well, on some level, the devil is at work
there.
I think that's true.
But I think that part of his humility and
his authority and how those two things
work with him
has got to do with the fact that he is a
sufferer of all sorts of things himself.
So a good example of this is in 1531, he
writes this woman, Barbara Liskeurch,

and her name was, and she has, like a lot of people at that time, she's imbibed all sorts of literature from the Reformation about predestination, including some of Calvin's stuff. And she's completely freaked out by it. And Luther's trying to comfort her. And he says, and she says, no, no, no, this is the devil's trick. He's trying to get you to look at yourself. You need to look at Christ and listen to Christ, the preached word, the one who is who says things you can actually grab hold of and rely on. So it's all good pastoral advice there. But what does he do in order to bring that message deeply into her awareness is that he says, he says, I've struggled with this too. In fact, struggling with this almost killed me. He said, I was so low that I didn't know which way to turn and somebody helped me. And so he, the way I put this in my book was I said he uses, he takes on this rhetoric of vulnerability as a way to step back and allow Christ to step forward into the space. And I think he does that very, very, very well. The other thing that Luther does, I think sometimes, is he wants to break people out of, see one of the things that happened at the time of the Reformation was that people who came into the Reformation faith still had the old penance theology clinging to them like, like, you know, a monkey on their back. And so he would often be saying to them,

no, you need to go out and ride your horse and hunt.
You need to go and joke.
And I think, you know, when he says, go and have a beer, I don't think he means go out and get smashed.
I think he means go out and go out with your mates, have a beer, laugh, tell some jokes.
But what might happen in that process is actually that you focus outwards on the gifts of God instead of focusing always in on yourself and your own feelings and your own, because this is, this of course, is part of the big problem that leads people into depression is that they, they focus inwards on themselves and they look for the solutions and they're always looking in.
And Luther simply giving them very practical advice that any good psychologist will tell a depressed or anxious person is no, look out, go and do something, get out in the sun.
You know, go out and see a film, go and get some of the world that God has created out there for you to enjoy and to love and to delight in.
Go and let some of that come into you through your senses.
And this will actually be a really important antidote for your mood problems.

Jessica: Dr. Pietsch, you wrote that Luther could be a very gentle correspondent.

Steven: Gentleness is not an adjective that I would usually apply to Luther.

Well, you see, this is part of the, this is part of the Luther myth that is a really big problem that you have to overcome when you're working with students who are, they're used to big bronze statues of Luther like we've got here, where he looks like this colossus.

He's sort of striding the earth about to whack people with his Bible, you know, just this big bulldog kind of guy.

Well, actually, Luther could be like that.

He could be very strident.

He could be incredibly funny, particularly dishing out very funny put downs to people.

But he's a complex personality, incredibly complex, and he was, he's able to be insightful, gentle, compassionate, tender even.

And when you read his letters to Katie and his children, and they're full of this stuff, and also to his friends.

This is the other thing you find when you read Luther's letters, is he knew about friendship.

With other men in particular, and how loyalty, honesty, forthrightness, but also gentleness and compassion.

Jason: But this other thing of bringing levity to the most serious moments, most serious times, I guess we should probably talk about Luther's humor.

Steven: Luther's humor is, see again, the popular picture of this is that Luther, you know, loved toilet jokes and all this stuff.

The psychologist back in the 50s,
Erickson, said
Luther never got out of the anal stage of
development.

You know, I think that's a big, I think
that whole thing sticks to Luther.

But he's actually far more subtle, and
his range of humor is very, very wide.

And he jokes about himself.

And part of it is that I think he wants
to actually get proportion back into
things.

So, you know, what happens to us human
beings is that we place ourselves
continually at the center
of the universe, you know.

We're like the medievals, they had, you
know, the earth at the center of the
universe.

We have ourselves at the center of the
universe and everything revolves around
us.

And that's part of our sinful condition.

Even when we're suffering, this is the
way we construct the universe, you know.

Luther says, no, no, no, it's not like
that, you know,

and I'm going to actually put you in your
place.

I'm a little bag of worms and so are you.

And so you belong out here on the edge of
the universe, not in the middle.

So I think that's part of what he's doing
in his humor is he's saying, no, no, no,
this is the way it works.

Christ is at the center, you're not.

And precisely because Christ is at the
center, because he is the Savior of the
world and

he's your Savior, the confidence in that
and that truth enables you to laugh at
everything else.

And you can, everything else, nothing

else matters.

You know, there's a really good quote I heard the other day.

If Jesus really is risen from the dead and he's your Savior, well then nothing matters, nothing else matters.

And that's sort of Luther's theology too.

He writes in 1531 to Queen Maria of Hungary and she's just been deposed from her throne.

And he says, yes, I know it hurts, but look,

you've got the whole kingdom of God.

The angels are your brothers and sisters.

The saints are your uncles and aunts.

You've got everything that you could possibly need and want in Christ.

Just let go of the rest of it.

So I think when Luther's joking and

bringing levity into it, I think he's

laughing at death,

laughing at suffering precisely because he can.

And he says, this is part of our freedom.

Part of the freedom is that we can laugh in the face of death.

I was reading his letter to his mother this morning when she's dying.

And he writes a little speech for her,

like, you know,

Luther loves to write speeches for people.

And he says, you know what?

You should say, dear death, don't you

know that you yourself are dead?

You know, you haven't got any power over me.

So it's kind of a lot of Luther's humor is whimsical.

It's full of irony and irony always has truth attached to it.

So I think that's so often what's going

on is that
when you make a joke, when you bring
humor into the situation,
also you make yourself ridiculous or you
show how ridiculous human pretensions are
against and in light of Christ's grace
and power in the world.
You know, Luther's idea that these
external, he calls things like music,
food, drink, humor,
he calls them the external consolations.
So these are the things that actually God
has given you in the creation,
the creation that he himself is going to
bring to consummation.
These things that you enjoy are little
foretastes of the new creation too.
This sense that when we, you know, when
we take delight in these good gifts
in the right way without becoming, you
know, abusive of ourselves or of other
people,
we are in some way foreshadowing that new
creation.
And in enjoying those things, we're
participating in our freedom as
Christians
in this new realm, this new kingdom.
And so, you know, whether it's delighting
in your relationship with your spouse
or delighting in playing with your
children, these very human
parts of existence, the things that make
up the texture of your life,
you know, these are all God's external
consolations for you.
And so he contrasts those with the
internal consolations, which are the
eternal things,
you know, and you're free in Christ, you
know, Christ's already died your death.
He's already suffered your sin.
So, you know, take hold of that with

Thanksgiving and have a great time.

Jessica: Some of the favorite letters in your book were ones that were written to women. I really enjoyed those for two reasons, because he was very respectful in the way that he spoke to women. And you don't always expect that someone from that time period would be. And he didn't talk down to them theologically. The letter to the woman who was worried about her election. He didn't speak as if he was talking to a child. Now he was used all the theology that he used in the other letters, expected her to understand it and interacted with her on that level. And I thought that was insightful in my understanding of Luther. And that was my favorite letter. Do you guys have favorite letters?

Jason: I do actually. One of my favorite letters, I have it open here. This is right at the end of his life when he writes to Katie. And he's in some pretty hot negotiations, and they're not going that well. Down in Eisleben. And the reason the letter gets dismissed is because he has some comments about the Jews in them where he says, there's a bunch of Jews wandering through here and I wonder what they're up to and they should be cast out. And it's hard for us to manage how to interpret some of those things. And he speaks too harshly about them. To my dear wife, Catherine Luther,

doctor's spouse in Wittenberg, keeper of
the pig market,
and gracious wife, whom I am bound to
serve hand and foot, grace and peace in
the Lord.

Dear Katie, you should read the gospel
according to Saint John in the small
catechism of which
you once said, everything in this book
has to do with me. You are worrying in
God's stead
as if he were not almighty. So one, I
love this because here is him writing
joyfully to his wife,
but he's also encouraging her with some
pretty sophisticated doctrine. And then
this other thing,
he asked her to pray for him in the
negotiations. So treating her as a priest
of God,
please intercede for us. And we know that
your prayers will work. And then he says,
let Master Philip read this letter for I
have not had time to write to him.
This should comfort you with the
knowledge that I love you very much,
as you already know. And since he has a
wife too, he will certainly understand.

Steven: The other letter, which I really like,
it's not my favorite. It's one of my
favorites. I don't
have one favorite, but is his letter to
Elizabeth von Cunitz. She's a young
woman who has come out
of the nunnery. She's been liberated from
a convent. And it's interesting. She's
obviously
a young woman who has been very, very
sheltered. She's young, sheltered,
inexperienced. Now she
there she is, she's got her freedom from
the convent, but then she's then

disoriented and
she becomes quite, it looks like she's
quite depressed and anxious. And Luther
writes to her
and he says, look, I'm very sorry that
you're going through this, but he says,
but my dear,
he says, I've got a job for you. I want
you to come back here to Wittenberg and
start a school
for girls. So he says, I'll just find a
little, he says, I hear that the evil
enemy is attacking
you with depressive thoughts. Oh my dear
young woman, do not let him frighten you.
You'll have
a job to do, a vocation, a priestly
vocation in the kingdom of God to be a
teacher. So this is,
this is Luther looking ahead, always
looking ahead to things and planning. He
always is a planner
for the future. And he looks ahead always
with hope. And I think you get this in
the letters
too. Have you noticed this? They're full
of hope.

Jason: He who has begun good work in you will
bring it to completion. He says that all
the time.
One thing I wanted to point out about that is,
it is, I think a modern mistake, probably
not just modern, but a modern mistake to
think that if you
have changed someone's mind about
something, then you've won the day. But
you've done your counseling,
you've done your proper pastoral care.
When you have someone have this awakening
moment,
oh, that's what God wants for my life.
Or, you know, whatever the thing is.

Luther is very wise in this because he knows that it's not simply the intellect and the ascent of the intellect that has to be won over. So your example is so wonderful.

Come and start a school. In other words, you can't just say, yes, now I think rightly about God's grace or his love for me or as if, aha. And we find this, at least this is my first year here on campus, but I think this is really important for our seminarians to not just think that I've come here to change my mind about certain things or to have this kind of mental intellectual awakening. It's that as this podcast is all about this, the things that go on, ideas have consequences. The way that you think theologically governs the way that you then act and the way that you live and the way that you deal with people. And so you see that beautifully in this letter, not just trusting Christ, but trusting Christ, start a school. In other words, there's so many things to be doing. And this is something I was initially as a young pastor, very resistant to, because I wanted to get people to think rightly about the teaching, get the catechism, get this.

And you started realizing, or I started realizing very quickly, the saints love to do things.

And Luther just understands this about human nature and certainly about just being a Christian.

The saints want to help. They just need sometimes some very clear locations to

operate into work.
So Luther does this also throughout his letters too, of not just trying to change people's mind about something as if that now wins the day, but he's always, and then go outside and then help this person and then go pray this prayer. And it's not in some sort of works, righteousness, but simply faith then starts doing things and rejoicing in what Christ has given.

Jessica: So the final question on the show is always this. What do you want our listeners to remember?
Dr. Pietsch would, no. Dr. Lane, what do you want our listeners to remember?
He pointed at you, so you have to go first.

Jason: Well, out of all the things you could be reading of Luther and of course sermons, and there's all sorts of things, I think probably for not just parish pastors, but for most Christians, if you have not read Luther's letters, you have to read them.
You just have to spend time with them because they are going to give you almost like a tool set to start applying not only to others, but also to yourself and your own struggles.
So that would be my practical encouragement.

Steven: Yeah, it's hard to top that. I would say I would want people to, I would want people to discover the real Luther by reading his letters, by reading his mail.
You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll shake

your head, you'll nod your head, you'll
take it off,
run out in the kitchen and tell your wife
about it or your husband about it,
because you'll find real life, real
Christian life there when you find the
real Luther because
Luther is in touch with Jesus Christ, the
Lord. What you find the real person and
the
real reformer and the real teacher there
in those letters, they're a real
treasure.

Jessica: That's it for today. Dr. Pietsch, thank you
for being here.

Steven: An absolute pleasure.

Jessica: Dr. Lane, thanks for being on the show.

Jason: Thanks for having me.

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