

#793 Orts: 1. On rules. 2. Concerning the hidebound. 3. On missing the point. 4. A bit of beggin

Colleagues,

Orts. Now there's a word for you, the kind you might expect to stumble across in the Thursday or Friday crossword puzzle when the going gets tougher. That's assuming you live in or near a city that still features daily delivery of a newspaper to the door, which my current hometown, Cleveland, Ohio, no longer does. That's as of two weeks ago, when the *Plain Dealer* laid off another batch of long-time employees and launched a risky experiment in digital publishing. "Get your paper delivered by email on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday; how delighted you will be"—thus the PD pooh-bahs. God for his part hears what the pooh-bahs don't—doesn't he always?—and I should be very much surprised if the Lord's ears aren't being assaulted in recent days by the sound of grinding dentures rising up in stricken complaint from people my age and older throughout northeastern Ohio. We miss our paper; our chance, come Thursday, to remember yet again that the three-letter word that means "scrap; leftover" is—yes—"ort."

Orts comprise this week's belated post—the best we can do for this week when the cupboard is rather bare and your fearless editors are up to their ears in other work. May today's scraps tantalize, at least. Better still if one or more should provoke one or more of you to send along a more nourishing contribution for us to pass around to the readership in the near future.

Scrap 1: When a rule broken is a rule kept. A quick take on Sunday's Gospel.

That's "Sunday," as in Sunday, Aug. 25. The Fourteenth after Pentecost (2013), Proper 16, Series C, in the [Revised Common Lectionary](#). Since you're getting this several days late, the preachers among you will want to file this note for next time the pericope rolls around, in A.D. 2016. Doubtless you'll have already perused the canny [Sabbatheology analysis](#) of the Gospel text, Luke 13:10-17, by Tim Hoyer. Add to it a pithy observation by the Rev. David Daley, a newly retired pastor of the Christian Reformed Church who keeps me and some other Lutheran clerics on our toes with his unfailingly solid work at our tri-weekly pericope study. The text opens, you'll recall, with Jesus healing a crippled woman in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Then it segues into his rebuke of the synagogue's head honcho and other carping opponents. David's note: when Jesus heals the woman, she and she alone starts praising God (v. 13). When he stuffs it down the throats of the legalists, the entire crowd goes nuts and praises God (v. 17). "Now there's a crowd that appreciates a miracle when it sees one," chuckles David.

My add-on comment: the crowds are still milling today, still waiting and watching for a scrap of genuine relief from the preachers they're obliged to listen to. Presumably those preachers recognize that a synonym for "relief" is "Sabbath rest." Isn't that exactly what Jesus winds up giving the crowd? When will today's preachers finally notice how the irony at this point is off-the-charts delicious, the rules being kept by dint of losing the rules? What will it take to get rule-bound types like most of us not only savoring the irony, but putting it to use on Christ's authority, for the sake of the crowds he still aims to relieve? *Veni, Creator Spiritus*.

Scrap 2: On the fate of the hidebound.

I was struck by Columnist [Joe Nocera's reflection in last Tuesday's New York Times](#) about the unfolding similarity in fates between the once ubiquitous Wang word-processor and the recently ubiquitous BlackBerry. Does anybody remember the Wang? It was the hottest, latest, must-have piece of office equipment in days when I was still pounding things out on a manual Olympia typewriter. I recall seeing one at incessant work in the fund-raising office of a school I worked at briefly after seminary. I drooled over it as over a new stick-shift BMW or any other item one craves but will never afford. A few years later I got my first PC. I promptly forgot that the Wang ever was until Nocera brought it up. I'll bet my iPhone-addicted children soon forget that they ever owned BlackBerries.

Nocera uses his column to explore why this happened. A few highlights:

"[An Wang] and his company stubbornly clung to the notion that the main thing people wanted from their computers was word processing; even after the company realized its error...it always seemed to be a step behind. By 1992, Wang Laboratories was bankrupt... "

"BlackBerry's co-chief executives, Mike Lazaridis and James Balsillie, simply didn't take the iPhone seriously at first—just as An Wang didn't take the personal computer seriously. After all, the iPhone had a touch screen that made it more difficult to write the kind of long, serious, work-related e-mails that BlackBerry users took for granted. The iPhone was a toy, they thought....

"More than that, though, 'BlackBerry had a huge installed base, and they were afraid to walk away from it,' said Carolina Milanesi, a research vice president with the Gartner Group. This is a problem that often plagues dominant companies. They are so

concerned with playing defense—protecting what they have built—that they stand paralyzed as new competitors arise with business models they can't, or won't, replicate.”

Thus Nocera. And now for the question that's niggled at me ever since I read the column: what has this to do with church? More than we'd care to imagine, I'll bet. I'm talking here of church in the small “c” sense of the organizations and institutions we establish, develop, and maintain as mechanisms for pulling people together and delivering the Gospel to them. Out of that will emerge—often, not always—that miracle of the Holy Spirit's creation that we confess in the Creeds: Church large “C”, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, the future of which is as far beyond question as the resurrection and ascension of Christ. We see this entity dimly, if at all; though we do believe in it, as we keep reminding each other whenever the Creeds are said. Mostly what fills our eyes is the little “c” stuff of buildings, assemblies, constitutions, liturgies, budgets, parish rolls, weekly programs, publications, websites, musical arrangements, leadership specifications, and all the other artifacts that accompany whatever ecclesiastical subculture we happen to belong to. We get attached to those artifacts, if not addicted to them. The latter verb applies the minute we can't imagine big “C” Church apart from them. Isn't that the point at which we fall into the trap that ensnared Wang and BlackBerry? It's not as if the Gospel depends for its delivery on German or Scandinavian hymnody, or on an eight-year program of post-secondary education for pastors, or on the great host of other good and useful things that we and our predecessors have invested heaps of effort and time in developing and honing. So much of it has served us well. What oafs we would be if didn't thank God for it. But it's equally oafish not to notice how the artifacts we treasure look and sound to others like clumsy outdated junk, barely penetrable and all but unusable. When I was in South

Africa in June, I stayed with some magnificently hospitable families, the members of which were either bi- or tri-lingual, German being the default language when no one else was around. But with a guest in the home, everyone used the guest's language, which in my case meant English. Can we imagine congregations that would treat their guests with equal courtesy when it came to the dialects of music and liturgy? Or how about an ecclesiastical jurisdiction that would overhaul its model of supplying word-and-sacrament ministry because the one that has worked for us—full-time pastor, pay and benefits coughed up by the congregation she serves—can't begin to work for the urban poor who need the Good News preached to them as much as anybody does. (Thus Christ, cf. Lk. 7:22.) Come to think of it, there are outfits around who have figured these things out, they're just not our outfits; and if they should thrive while we wane, mayhap we'd do well to read in this the judgment of God. If we're too stuck on nonessentials to deliver the essential Gospel goods, then he'll find someone else who will.

Gloomy thoughts for a late August evening, but there it is. Responses, anyone?

Scrap 3. Why Law-and-Gospel types need to sort out the matters touched on in Scrap 2.

In a word, they don't get it, they being today's versions of the crowds that tagged along with Jesus in the Gospel accounts. Stumbling into churches like ours, they miss the real deal of promise, forgiveness, and genuine hope because they can't get past the unappealing packages we serve it in. Still, they're earnest about religion and they see themselves as earnestly Christian—and here's the sort of thing that they imagine this to be:

“See, the whole point of being a Christian means you follow the

teachings of Christ.”

This is from one Allan Clifton, ranting on forwardprogressives.com about the failure of Republicans to meet this standard. Doubtless he means well. If only he'd allow St. Paul to clue him in on what “the whole point of being a Christian” is really all about.

Back to gloomy thoughts: I'll bet there are scads of folks in our congregations who would join Clifton in missing “the whole point.” But that's a line of thought to pursue some other evening.

Scrap 4: Contributions, anyone?

We welcome them with open arms. We'll give them a careful eye. We'll either pass them along or tell you why we didn't. In any case, better your thoughtful essay than my spur-of-the-moment meanderings. Which said—

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team