

“Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?” (Part 1)

Co-Missioners,

This is another offering from your editor, Jerome Burce. In passing it along he observes that it's been a long time in gestation, and is still a work in progress. A prelude of sorts appeared three and a half years ago in Thursday Theology. It [introduced and accounted for the essay's brusque title](#). That the essay itself is starting finally to come your way has to do in part with two recent events. The first was the furor that erupted in the United Methodist Church last month over gay and lesbian relationships, a replay of things seen in other mainline groups, though with a different outcome. The Lutheran version of this furor is one of the precipitants of Jerry's essay, so it seemed to him timely that he start pushing it your way.

An even better reason for this was last week's death—St. Paul would call it the falling asleep—of Edward H. Schroder, esteemed pastor and doctor of the church, teacher to Jerry and countless others, co-founder of Crossings, Gospel purveyor par excellence. Jerry notes that what you're about to read is critically dependent on a sharp nudge he once got from Ed. It happened so long ago and in such a manner that he can't imagine Ed ever recalling it. Still the nudge happened, and, decades later, thoughts tumbled out. What better way, says Jerry, to thank and praise Almighty God for gifts granted through Ed than by passing these scraps along.

What you're getting is the first installment of multipart piece, as Jerry will explain.

Ed's funeral is set for next week Wednesday, 10 a.m., at Bethel

Lutheran Church in University Heights, Missouri. For further details, [see the obituary](#). For the sake of many who can't make the funeral but would like even so to gather in Ed's honor and memory, with thanks to God above all, the Crossings Board of Directors is planning a follow-up event in June. Details will be announced very soon.

*Peace and Joy,
The Crossing Community*

"Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?" Part 1.

by Jerome Burce

"If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Thus Christ our Lord, in the snippet of John 8 that Lutherans hear once a year on Reformation Sunday.

To hear is one thing, of course. To grasp is quite another. I will hazard a guess that most of the men and women who expound on this text from Lutheran pulpits year after year are faking it. What Jesus says eludes them. See, for example, how they hate each other.



So much for an abstract of the essay to follow. It looks to be long one, coming to you in several installments. God grant a brighter mood as the writing unfolds.

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God's good news in Christ Jesus has eluded me, the sinner who writes this, for much of my life. Count me until recently among those Reformation Sunday fakers.

Or to put that more gently, count me among the baptized multitude that sees only in part, near blindness being the norm. At issue is the kind of vision St. John explores at length throughout his Gospel. It happens not through eyes, nor even the heart, as the Western metaphor would have it, but somewhere in the viscera. It's the deep-down awareness that constitutes genuine knowing, in which words and concepts are finally and wonderfully married to recognition and experience. The gut gets

it. This happens to Thomas at the end of John 20. "My Lord and my God" is said with a gasp as the light flips on. Luther famously reports a similar gasp as he tussled with Romans 1. A quaff of glorious freedom came next, the taste of which so sears the memory that it cannot be forgotten.

I can point to three such gasps in the course of my own development as a servant of the Word. The first happened when I was in my second year of seminary, the next when I was teaching some second-year seminarians in the course of my first call, and the third about nine years ago as I responded on the fly to a parishioner's crisis of conscience. At issue in each case were problems of insufficient righteousness and intractable sin, the same matters that bedeviled Luther. The outcome every time was to find myself bouncing like a happy baby in the lap of Christ. Mingled with the giggles were prayers that others might know the same relief.

The key insight that drove Luther's work is hard to come by, and even harder to hang on to. The mantras coined to convey the insight—justification by faith; grace alone; saint-and-sinner—are easy to mouth. They're tough to swallow. Tougher still is to get them digested in such a way that they infuse a person's functional outlook on herself, her baptized brother, her stumbling, bumbling church. Somewhere deep in every gut is a granite-like deposit of *opinio legis*, as Luther and company called it, an aspect of which is the dread of being caught in public draped in sinners' rags. Driving the dread is a universal and, frankly, God-given assumption that there are other and better things for me to wear, if only I had the good sense and sartorial manners to pick them out from my behavioral or ideational wardrobes and put them on. Sound doctrine, of course, denies that any person is able to do this. From God's point of view we all lack the sense and are short on the manners. "There is no one who is righteous, no not one." Thus it is written—in

the marrow of our bones as well as the pages of Scripture. That doesn't stop anybody from trying to accomplish the feat. This includes the very people who champion the doctrine that says it can't be done. Here I think in particular of Luther's confessional heirs. I have yet in my all years, 66 and counting, to find a Lutheran or any group of Lutherans that wasn't at pains, the way everyone else is, to prove that our clothes aren't so shabby after all, if only in comparison with the eyesores that "those others" are shambling around in.

We need to quit it. That's the brunt of my argument today. It is way past time for us to recognize that the baby in Jesus' lap is always a very dirty baby, smeared with grime from head to toe. If she squeals with delight, it's in part because she notices how the adult who owns this lap doesn't seem to mind for once how dirty she is, the way those other pseudo-adults insist on doing. Why should he mind? Dirt, after all, is his specialty. He knows how to handle it, and what to do with it. Sensing this, the baby also doesn't mind that the kid bouncing over there on Jesus' other knee is as filthy as she is. If anything, she giggles all the more, so happy is she with the Savior that both of them get to enjoy. As the Man once said, "Unless you receive the kingdom of God like a little child, you shall not enter it."

Ain't that the truth.

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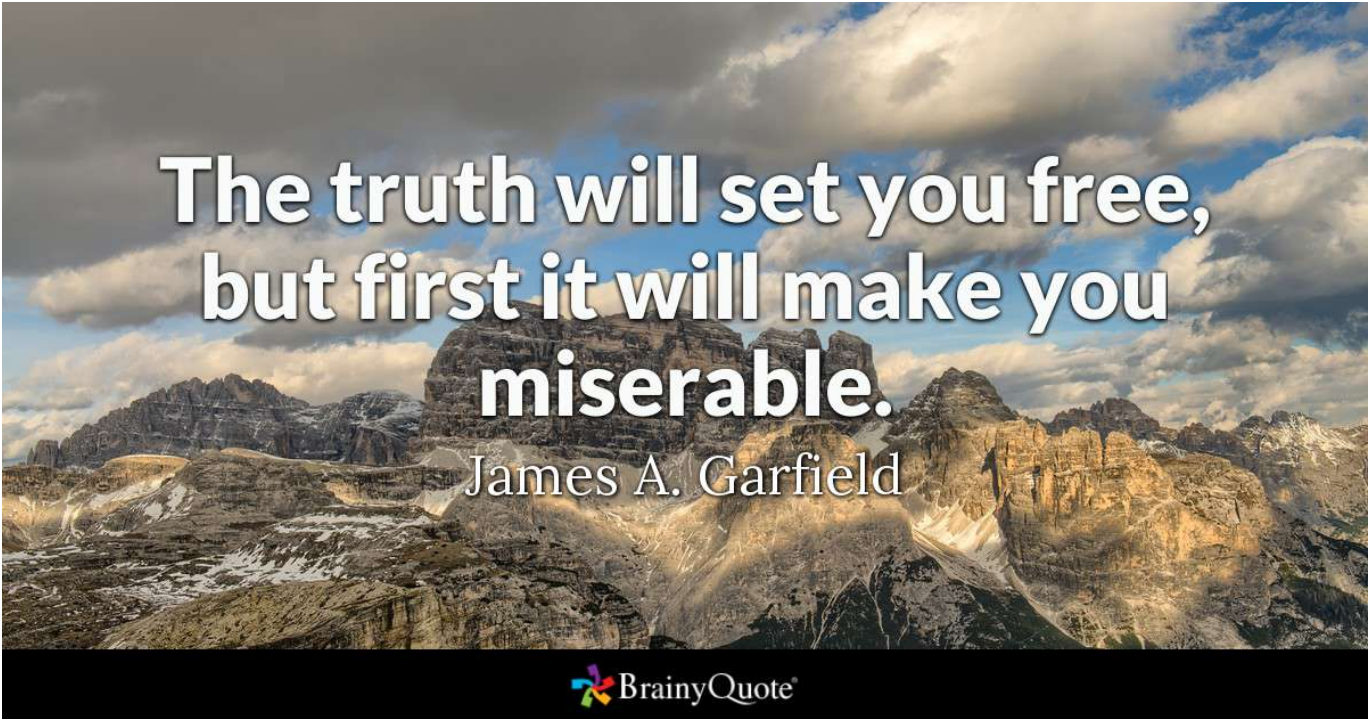
Here is when this light flipped on for me.

One afternoon the man walks in my office with trouble etched all over his face. Like me, he's a lifelong Lutheran, and the son of a Missouri Synod pastor. I say this as a point of fact, nothing more. It is not the ELCA renegade taking a subtle, sideways poke at the LCMS he left behind. That I should have to mention this is an indicator of the pickle we Lutherans are in.

Anyway, the man sits. He talks. He pours out his heart. Though a member for a while of this ELCA congregation, he suddenly feels that he can no longer commune here. After all, six months ago—or is it ten, or twelve—the churchwide assembly authorized synods and congregations to follow their own judgment in the matter of ordaining or calling pastors who are in open, committed, same-sex relationships. But to do this, he says, is sinful. And though our own congregation will not be following this path, still, are we not somehow endorsing sin by staying with the ELCA? And isn't the endorsement of sin a participation in sin? And if he should then continue communing here, won't he be sinning as well?

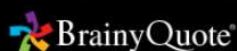
So now it's me who sits, who listens, who wonders what to say. And for a long minute my foot dangles over the precipice that we Lutheran lemmings keep rushing for like every other batch of sinners, whatever their label or flavor.

The precipice is the old, unwinnable argument that Adam and Eve have been locked in ever since they both opted to decide for themselves what is good and what is not. At its base are sharp and nasty rocks that break relationships apart. They sunder families. They splinter churches. Now and then they lead to war.



**The truth will set you free,
but first it will make you
miserable.**

James A. Garfield



So tempted I am in this moment with the grieving man to take the plunge. I ponder on how to make the case with him for staying in the ELCA. I wonder how I can persuade him that doing so is “the right thing” in this particular set of circumstances, or if not right, then at least okay; at least better than the alternative of trying to bail and breaking our own congregation apart in the process. I muse on whether or not to praise the ELCA for its “openness” and “inclusivity,” scoring points if I can with observations along the way about the “narrow mindedness” of the other crowd. But this won’t fly, I quickly decide. I don’t buy it myself. In any case, what weighs him down is the imperative of pleasing God by obeying God, the one whose Bible contains injunctions against same-sex relations. The other crowd seems to honor this as our crowd does not. They appear to him more righteous, and it will do no good with him, in this moment, to rehearse the arguments of 30 years or more by which the advocates of change, so called, have tried to persuade their opponents that these Biblical injunctions don’t apply to current circumstances and sensibilities. Even if I bought those arguments myself, they won’t persuade him. They’ll merely add to

his distress. He'll hear me siding with "the sinners." He'll hear me saying, "You are wrong." We all know what happens next. He'll get to his feet. He'll take his leave. The back of his head as he passes through my door is the last I'll ever see of him.

I toy with alternatives, the details of which I won't bother to rehearse. I'm certain that one or two will end like the first scenario, in immediate rupture. Another might serve to keep him with us for a few more months, another year or two at best; though he's sure to be sullen and half-hearted the way people get when they are quietly ashamed, as he will be. It will seem to him that he let his pastor talk him out of acting on the courage of his convictions. He'll try for a while not to think about it too much. At some point he'll slink away.

Isn't this how disputes about righteousness always end? Except this one didn't.

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I can't begin to say where the thought came from, or how it happened that the words expressing it began tumbling from my mouth. When, looking back, I thank the Holy Spirit for this, I do so for one reason only. It pulled us both away from the edge of the cliff and took us instead down the path that Jesus pointed to when he said, "I am the Way."

“Look,” I tell my troubled friend. “You’re afraid of sinning by communing with sinners. But isn’t it way too late for that? Have either of us ever participated in a communion, whether here or in any other church, that wasn’t a communion with



other sinners? Who else, after all, is communion for? And why would somebody think to bother with communing if he or she were not a sinner? As it happens, you and I have been eating and drinking together at the table these past several years. So take it as a matter of fact that I’ve been tarring you Sunday after Sunday with a great heap of my sin. And should I point out that you’ve dirtied me in turn, I can’t imagine for a moment that you’d argue with that.

“Here’s the thing,” I continue. “Who else is with us at every communion—a person as up to his neck as you and I are in the mess we sinners bring to it? Whose is the body, the blood, that we sully and contaminate when we eat and drink it? But to whom does he give this body and blood if not contaminating sinners? Does he, our Lord Christ, not have the wherewithal—the power, the authority, the everlasting Easter—to deal with the dirt and send us on our way smelling like roses, at least where God is concerned? Isn’t that the whole point of the eating and drinking?

“And by the way, have you or I ever heard this Christ of ours announce a limit on the nature, scope or magnitude of the sin he’s willing and able to deal with? Sure, bishops, theologians and assemblies have had all kinds of ideas along these lines over the church’s many centuries, but what about Christ himself?

Has he ever announced, for example, that he'll sully himself with straight sinners, though not with gay sinners? Or that only those sinners need apply for his touch who toe the party line as right-thinking or right-doing sinners? Is there anyone in our congregation—in the ELCA, the LCMS, the Wisconsin Synod, for that matter—that Christ would chase away from the true communion that happens in our own sanctuary every week? I call it true because it's anchored squarely in the word and promise of Jesus that we speak, hear, and remember every time it's offered. 'For you,' he says. Just plain 'you,' no modifying adjectives or conditioning adverbs hanging from it. As it happens, the 'you' who wind up getting the benefit of Christ's eucharistic touch are those sinners—only and always sinners; the self-styled 'righteous' tend to stay away of their own accord—who by the Holy Spirit's grace have just enough faith and nerve to walk up here with hands and mouths open to receive what Jesus gives.

"One last thought," I say. "If Christ won't hesitate to enmesh himself like this with a confused and messy bunch of ELCA sinners, why should we?"

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Truth in advertising: the above is not a verbatim report of that long-ago conversation, but an imagined reconstruction of it. Still, the gist of the thing is all there.

Looking back, I seem to recall my friend's face beginning to soften as I babbled down the path I had either stumbled or been driven onto; and when we got to the heart of the matter, Christ for sinners, his body relaxed too. Our parting was cordial that day. He was in church the next Sunday and came to communion, looking glad to be there. And so it continued until the day a job change took him to a city in another state.

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A sentence suddenly recalled from days in a “Lutheran Confessions” class for first-year seminarians: “For the true unity of the church it is enough—*satis est*—to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). As ground-level proof I submit this episode.

This noted, what surprises me most these days about the episode—it dismays me too—is the surprise I felt on thinking suddenly, after twenty five years in ordained ministry, to drag Christ into a conversation like this and hand the mess over to him. Isn’t this what servants of the Gospel are given to do as their first and last responsibility? I think now of Matthew’s parable of the talents (25:14-30), the point of which is to use Christ, to risk investing his benefits, and to avoid at all costs the stupidity of stashing them away in safekeeping for fear of cheating him off should one somehow misspend them. So why in countless hours wasted prior to this point on the gay sex debate had I kept Christ out of it, his benefits buried in a hole as if they were somehow irrelevant to the only argument that mattered. This of course was the legal one. “Who is right on this issue, and who is wrong? And what shall we do about the scoundrels who refuse to agree with us? Since when does God allow us to consort with sinners of that stripe?”

These days I’m asking a different question. “Since when does Christ permit us to dodge sinners of any stripe?”

Again, I can’t explain why it took me so long to get around to this. “Duh,” as my children might say. But then another conundrum: I wish I could observe that mine was one small voice in a great chorus of voices, all shouting the same question—that latter one, that is, compelled by the Gospel as opposed to the Law. But the chorus is not there, at least not that I notice.

Nor has it been. I would not have taken nearly so long to reach the path I finally followed had others flocked down it before me. Even people I learned the Gospel from have seemed reluctant to follow it.

I think we are all terrified of being caught in the open as sinners-in-truth. I think this terror insults Christ. It is also wreaking havoc with the church and the mission Christ entrusts to it. See again how we Christians hate each other.

These are the matters I plan to explore in this essay's next installment.

+ To God Alone the Glory +

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community

“Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?” –Preface and Ur-text

Colleagues,

- 1. The congregation I serve is going to celebrate the Reformation this coming Sunday. So will lots of other Lutheran churches in the U.S., and elsewhere too. Whether and how joyfully they do it will depend heavily on their pastors' opinions about the merits of what happened in*

1517 and thereafter, and, more to the point, about the value of a distinct and vivid Lutheran identity for the mission of Christ in the world of 2015. There's dispute about this in most every U.S. Lutheran camp today, whatever its cultural leaning, to the right as well as the left. For her part, the ELCA's Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton knows value when she sees it. Ever since her election two years ago she's been working hard to shove some steel up the Lutheran spines of her large, unruly flock. [Her latest effort along these lines](#) appeared a week or two ago in the October issue of *The Lutheran*. You'll want to read it if you haven't yet. May it whet your appetite for things that follow here.

2. From the solemn to the silly: [Old Lutheran](#) is an enterprise that peddles sub-cultural kitsch, chiefly via the Internet, from its base in Moorhead, Minnesota. They used email this Monday to push their latest product, a zinfandel from the Borra Vineyard of Lodi, California, available in "limited supply," which is simply to say, "Buy today!" The wine's label? You guessed it: [Zin Boldly](#), the words broadly emblazoned over a representation of Luther's seal. The attending ad copy includes the famous dictum, Luther to Melanchthon: "Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly...." So sin with zin, shall we? It would be churlish, I suppose, not to chuckle over this, at least a little; though if we failed to grind our teeth when the chuckle died away—that, I'm sure, would be foolish.
3. Better still if we grind our teeth a lot. I submit on this eve of the Reformation's 498th anniversary that Luther's heirs have lost their grip, if ever they had one, on his key anthropological insight. Having done so, they're trashing Christ, damaging the Church, and cheating neighbors of the Gospel God wants them to hear.

One sees this going on at the close, personal level of interactions within a congregation. One sees it just as vividly in the operations of our church bodies. When we're forced by time or circumstance to flash our deepest convictions, we prove over and over that we're Lutheran in name only. Scrape away the label, and you'll find a simmering Calvinist, a frothing "evangelical," here and there a bit of closet [Tridentine](#)Catholic. OK, I'm exaggerating—though not as much as I wish I were. What does it say about us when the most we're willing to make of Luther at his best and most distinctive is a little joke for insiders on a bottle of wine?

4. This is, of course, a weighty charge, too weighty by far to deal with in a single post. So what I send today is nothing more than a preface for some posts to come, two or three of them at least, maybe more. They'll arrive in serial form under the title the present post bears: "Will no one have the guts to be a sinner?" This, I'll argue, is the question of the hour that Lutherans ought to be pressing for the sake of a church and a world that keeps tearing itself to pieces in the sinner's mad, incessant quest to be deemed righteous on one's own account. We Lutherans are by no means strangers to this madness, nor can we be; though were we serious about the astonishing gifts of faith and insight that the Holy Spirit surfaced through Luther and his colleagues, we'd be able at least to spot the madness, and name it, and struggle against it. I, for one, see little or none of that going on among us. Struggles there are, and in grievous abundance; but they're invariably of the kind the madness itself induces, where the fight boils down to who is right and who is wrong, woe to the latter, bennies to the former, Christ-for-us-all being more or less beside the point. Christ always lands in the trash when sinners refuse to

own their sin. He's gotten far too familiar of late with Lutheran dumpsters—or again, so I plan to argue.

5. I've been stewing on this for some years now, ever since the fellow walked into my office to say that he couldn't come to communion because that would mean communing with a sinful church. I'll tell that story when I launch the first episode. For now I merely point to it as the slap in the face that got the wheels churning. Around that time I stumbled by sheer accident across an incidental bit in the massive corpus of Luther's output—however did the man manage to get all this on paper?—where he says something about sin that took me by surprise. It seemed blithe and cavalier. I could think of no one else who had dared in my hearing or reading to talk that way. The wheels turned faster. Not long after my title emerged. I mean that question about having “the guts to be a sinner.” I wrestled for a time with “the guts.” It's crude. It sounds careless. “The nerve” would be less offensive. But then it occurred to me how guts are featured in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has them, and in a double sense, not only the English one of “courage,” but also in the New Testament Greek conception, where churning bowels are a signal of pity and compassion. So gutsy Jesus sits with sinners, and feeds them, and is crucified for them; and in and through all this, God “[is making] him to be sin who knew no sin,” as Paul describes it (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus being sinner-for-us was, first to last, about God-in-Christ having the guts to get the job done. It still is. “Receive the Holy Spirit...”, Jesus said. I got this far in my thinking and returned to my original title. If it scrapes and offends, so be it.
6. Back to Luther. The line about sin that startled me some time ago was not the famous one that Old Lutheran abused for its wine label. I heard about “sin boldly” in my

seminary days. The same was true, I'm sure, for all my classmates, though we caught it in passing, and few if any took the time to track down the source and read it in context. Had we done so we might have noticed, already then, how flagrant Luther gets in his recognition of sin as a condition we're obliged to face, admit, accept, and, with Christ in view, to live with more or less cheerfully. It may be that some or many of you have yet to see the passage, so I pass it along as this year's Reformation gift, though also as a key piece of grounding for the reflections to come. The date is August 1, 1521, barely two months since Charles V issued the [Edict of Worms](#), making Luther an outlaw. Luther, then, is holed up in the Wartburg Castle. Even so he's both receiving and responding to a stream of reports and letters from Wittenberg. The latest news is about two disputations that his colleague Karlstadt has undertaken, one about whether priests, monks, and nuns can abandon vows and get married, and the other about making the sacrament available to the laity in both kinds, wine as well as bread. It's with these in mind that Luther now writes to Philip Melanchthon. After propounding his current views in both matters, he swings abruptly to the following, behind which must surely lie a pastoral concern for a friend who is staring at the challenge of advocating moves that others will denounce loudly as wicked and sinful. "Break a vow? Are you kidding?" Says Luther:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. **Be a sinner** and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] **we have**

to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It is enough that by the riches of God's glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. **No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day.** Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner. (Letters I, Volume 48 of Luther's Works, American Edition, p. 281- 282; emphases added.)

7. This was radical stuff. It still is. I can't help but think that had Luther said these things at the Diet of Worms under the grilling of John Eck, he'd have been clapped in irons on the spot and burned at the stake the next day. I'm pretty sure that were someone to talk like this in today's Lutheran assemblies without mentioning Luther as source, he or she would be shown the door, and that right smartly.

But more on this in coming weeks or months, though not immediately. We have some fresh work from Ed Schroeder that awaits your perusal. Look for a first installment of that two weeks from now.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

God's Facebook and the Other One

Hark, TIME's year-end cover sings
"Zuckerberg is king of kings."
His FACEBOOK now makes us able
To undo the Tower of Babel.

Joyful, from all nations rise,
Linked as friends through cyber skies.
Near one billion at his fountain
["Zuckerberg" means sugar-mountain!]

But with his sugar can you cook
Recipes from God's Facebook?

I'm doubtful. I speak from hands-on ignorance—I'm not (yet) in the club, so far as I know. But I have worked through TIME's 24-page(!) cover story, cum many "faces." Zuckerberg's messaging cited there has a messianic ring. Is he promoting an alternate Messiah to the one who came via a manger? His own words, as cited by TIME, even have a clearly Hebrew-Bible messianic ring. Which is no surprise, since that is his heritage. The TIME article describes his outer-space Bar Mitzvah celebration not too many years ago.

What is Zuckerberg up to? "'We're trying to map out what exists in the world. In the world, there's trust. I think as humans we fundamentally parse the world through the people and relationships we have around us. So at its core, what we're trying to do is map out all of those trust relationships, which you can call . . . friendships.' He calls this map the social graph and it's a network of an entirely new kind."

Map out what exists in the world
Trust relationships—ALL of them.
A network of an entirely new kind

If that's not a messiah's agenda—the whole world, the human heart, a new human community—what is?

Yet, that wouldn't necessarily make Mark Zuckerberg a competitor to the Mangled Messiah, would it? All depends. Just how "soteriological" is the Facebook agenda? How much salvation? What all gets saved? What doesn't?

Just for fun, let's take Mark Zuckerberg's family name as the goal of the Facebook project. Mark is trying to get "what exists in the world" to a sugar-mountain, where "trust relationships (ALL of them)" are mountaintop sweet. Call it friendship. That is indeed a network of a new kind, a new map of what exists in the world. In the Hebrew scriptures that's called return from exile, coming home to the promised land. In the Christian gospels, that sounds like the kingdom of God.

But how do you get to that sugar mountain? To say it point-blank, Zuckerberg offers to lead us to the promised land via Sinai mountain. Au contraire, the Mangled Messiah's offer comes via Calvary mountain. Not only is the mountain route on the road-maps different, but the sugar-mountains at the end of the road are two different mountains. So it seems to me.

Is that what's really going on behind the face of Facebook? Well, consider this. Both offers make the same claim:

Map out what exists in the world
Trust relationships—ALL of them.
A network of a new kind

And, how in my head did this come to pass? Well, a funny thing

happened on the way to Christmas Day worship at our Bethel Lutheran congregation here in St. Louis this past Saturday. I'd been asked to be the homilist for the liturgy. Together with our parish musician, Steve Mager, we'd worked out "something a bit different." We were going to focus the homily on the carol "Hark, the herald angels sing." We'd dug into its history. Text by Charles Wesley 1739. Originally ten verses of four lines each and no "herald angels" in the original first line. Instead "Hark, how all the welkin rings," What's "welkin"? We had to find out. The tune we all know is by Felix Mendelssohn (Lutheran Christian with famous Jewish family roots) 1840. Composed by Mendelssohn NOT for this carol, but for a cantata he wrote to honor the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's movable-type printing press in 1440. [Those three staccato notes in the tune were sung with exclamatory gusto to the syllables: Gu-ten-berg.]

And to make Wesley's poetry fit the Mendelssohn tune, you need 8-line stanzas. So someone scissored and pasted. 10 verses become 5 verses, and then, sadly, the five get shortened to 4 in the "old" Missouri Synod hymnbook and now only three in the hymnal in our pews. And super-sad is that the gutsiest verses messaging Wesley's Christmas gospel theology disappear as the text shrinks.

Here was the plan for Christmas Day. We'd have all ten original verses printed in the worship folder. My homily would announce that Wesley's original message would be the sermon for the day. And my part would be to walk/talk through his 10-verse proclamation and link it to us. Steve would google up an earlier tune, possibly the original from 1739. [He did find one in the 1863 "Episcopal Hymnal for Sunday Schools."] The choir would sing the first 8 verses to that tune and then we'd all join in for the last two, and I would then homilize. So I worked on the Wesley text. First two verses = his retelling the shepherd/angels part of Luke's Christmas story. In the next four

he's doing the "depth theology" of what all was going on, the cosmic story, the big story behind that shepherds-and-messengers encounter. Yes, in those four verses, "a new map of what exists in the world," but I didn't know that phrase yet.

And in the final four verses, we become the speakers, addressing the Manged Messiah ourselves. "Thee, thy, thine" 7 times. "Us, ours" 6 times.

All that Steve and I had worked out did indeed happen, BUT two days before Christmas, neighbor and colleague Fred Danker tosses his copy of TIME's "Person of the Year" issue on our table. "Preachers should not open their mouths until they've read this." Fred didn't know that that was to be my job in his/our congregation on Christmas Day. As if I didn't have enough to do already. Well, if Fred Danker says something is a "you've gotta," then you'd better pay attention. But I didn't get to it on Dec. 24, so at 5 a.m. on the 25th I did. And that became the context for our waltzing with Wesley at Bethel Lutheran congregation on Christmas day in the morning.

Something like this:

Wesley's original text.

1. Hark, how all the welkin rings,
"Glory to the King of kings;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
2. Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
Universal nature say,
"Christ the Lord is born to-day!"
3. Christ, by highest Heaven ador'd,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Late in time behold him come,

- Offspring of a Virgin's womb!
4. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased as man with men to appear,
Jesus! Our Immanuel here!
 5. Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
 6. Mild He lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.
 7. Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
 8. Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.
 9. Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.
 10. Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form'd in each believing heart.

Verses 1 and 2 are Wesley retelling Luke 2:8-20.

"Hark!" Listen up! Pay attention.

Not angels are doing the heralding, but the "welkin," the heavens [German parallel term Wolken, the clouds] are ringing

bells to get our attention. Curious how the “herald angels” got into the text. [I never found out.] Wesley never mentions them in any of the ten verses. It is the welkin, the rooftop of the cosmos, that is doing the messaging. Messenger, of course, is the nickel-word meaning of “angel” in both Hebrew and Greek throughout the Bible. No celestial feather-friend—only rare references to wings. But in every case, God’s designated messenger with a message that always comes with a Hark! Pay attention. Listen up. John the Baptist is called “angelos” in the gospels for just this reason. Camel-skin, not feathers, was his cover-fabric.

It’s all about message. When I was a kid “message” was only a noun. Now it’s also a verb, an action. And that may not be all bad, for messages shape our lives. Zuckerberg is right, Biblically right: messages create trust relationships. They also create the very opposite. Words have power. For good or ill, we live from messages. That’s Biblical too.

When Bob Bertram preached the ordination sermon for our Bethel pastor Bill Yancey, his title was “The Message Makes the Messenger.” Well, “the message also makes the messagee,” the ones receiving the message. That is, it does if you hearken, listen up, to the message. For “hearkening” is the way into the human heart. The message you hang your heart on is the message that makes you you. So straight from the heavens (no more mysterious than cyberspace) comes a message. With the “hark! stay on message, this message.” “Peace, mercy, reconciled”—all this from the “welkin.” Better yet, peace, mercy, reconciled WITH the One who is the Lord of that welkin and on earth. And Joy and Triumph for “all ye” (us) to join. Universal nature (whatever Wesley may have had in mind with those words, but it’s clearly cosmic) keeps telegraphing the message. Hark. Pay attention. Listen up! To what’s happening in Bethlehem. Verse two concludes: “Christ the Lord is born to-day!” OK, how does

that birthing get us to the sugar-mountaintops of "Peace, mercy, reconciled"?

Thought you'd never ask. Now Wesley takes over the messenger role. Verses 3,4,5,6. He spells out what that word LORD means if/when the Manged Messiah is one's Lord. We need to remember: the word LORD doesn't mean boss; it means owner. Ownership restoration is under way throughout the welkin and the earth. Cosmic stuff. And you're part of that cosmos.

Verse 3. Here's who this infant is. THE owner showing up. Yes, "late in time," but nevertheless now come via a most unexpected birth canal. Even with that exclamation point (!) he's the one to behold. So not only hearken with your ears, but look with your eyes.

Verse 4. "Veiled" not only in such an un-royal maternity ward, but beginning here all the way to Mt Calvary. And hidden under that humanity, sub cruce tecta (as Luther liked to say: covered under the cross) is the deity in our skin. Not stuck in our flesh, but "pleased" to be there. Our God-WITH-us is our God-ONE-of-us.

Verse 5. It's about healing. [Note who has the wings!] Peace, Righteousness, Life, Light. All of these are God-connection terms. God-friendship restored.

Verse 6. What needs healing is humankind's congenital birth-defect. The absence of all those God-friendship terms above. The congenital birth defect we all carry is that we are born to die. Needed is a raising, a resurrection from that no-exceptions birth defect. The Manged Messiah, like us with our own kind of death-marked birthing, has himself a double birthing. In Bethlehem from Mary, in eternity from the Father. In that combo of double-birthing he effects our raising. Call it a "second" birth. A life restored, now from God's own DNA, that, as this

Jesus later will say, is one that “though you die (from that first-birth’s defect), yet you shall live.” Yes, that is the wild claim emanating from Bethlehem.

In verses 7,8,9, and 10 Wesley gives us our lines for response. All four verses have us doing what the shepherds did at the end of the Lukan story: “Glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.” Note well that very last word: “heard.” It started with “hark” and it ends with “heard.” They got the message. They were hanging their hearts on it. They HEARD it. From “heard” to “heart” is only a one-letter shift. Interestingly enough, the shepherds thereby take over the original job the welkin-messengers had as the story began. “Glorifying and praising,” you may remember, was what the “angeloi” were doing. So Wesley brings us into that band of angels, transforming us into messengers ourselves. And what does he have us say?

7. Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman’s conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent’s head.

Come, Lord Jesus. Do ownership transfer with us. Casa mea, casa sua. My home, your home. Let that ancient gospel-promise from Genesis 3 come true for us. The serpent is not just “out there,” but has residence within us as well. Do your home-ownership transaction with us.

8. Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Do it now. Apart from our original divine DNA, what’s “natural” for us is still ruined nature. Join us to your rescue operation.

Give us a new “natural.” Your “natural.”

9. Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

Re-image us. Note the word “efface.” In the Facebook operation of the Mangled Messiah, old faces are swapped for new faces. Give us, Lord, a new face, from your very own facebook. What a sweet swap that is. Not at all just “saving face,” but swapping faces. Getting a saved-face to replace the Adamic one where the serpent’s “nature” also shows up on our face. Don’t just show us YOUR face. STAMP it (feisty verb) on us in your face-swapping.

10. Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form’d in each believing heart.

Let this sweet-swap, this move to your sugar-mountain happen not only to us, but to all. It’s all about what’s going on in the inner self, the heart. That’s where believing/unbelieving happen. Not in the head, but the heart. It’s all about heart and hearken and heard.

The message your heart hearkens to and hears makes you who you are. The first Christmas messengers, Wesley, and in these last verses we ourselves have stayed on this message. Peace, mercy, reconciled. That’s the Bethlehem offer. It claims to map out what exists in the world. To heal trust relationships—ALL of them—beginning with the ruined one at the root of all trust-relationships. [If only Zuckerberg would have thechutzpah to transmit the message for fixing THAT one!] It claims to create a network of an entirely new kind.

With the offer comes the invitation: Hang your heart here.

That's, sortuv, how the homily went. There were more ad lib references to the TIME magazine story. For the hymn of the day following the homily the congregation made Wesley's words their own (in the abbreviated version in our hymnal) sung to Mendelssohn's melody.

For next week's post I ask you colleagues who are Facebook insiders to join the conversation. Can Zuckerberg's friendship-messianism be baptized for the Mangered Messiah's purposes? Even if he may have messianic pretensions with his creation, does that necessarily spill over to folks when they sign up? It's happened before that a messiah's followers didn't actually go where he sought to lead them. Is there wiggle-room on Facebook? Does Marshall McLuhan's famous adage about television decades ago, "the medium IS the message," apply to Facebook too? Is there an implicit message—a gospel, even—in the very medium, even apart from any Zuckerberg-hype, that has already supplanted Luke's Christmas gospel?

How about that primal focus on trust-relationships? Can human trust-relationships flourish if the God-distrust relationship (Augsburg Confession, Art.2) isn't fixed first? What sort of sugar-mountain do you get to via Sinai-mountain's second table (social-network-friendship big time!) when you ignore the first table (primal friendship big-time)? I invite Facebook insiders to send me your prose to help compose next week's posting.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Can Rome be Home? Yes and No Answers from 2 Canadian Anglicans.

Colleagues,

[Marie here. Ed's pretty sick. He's had erratic blood sugars, headache, nausea, developing into double vision and weakness. Blood tests, CAT scan, ophthalmological examination for intraocular pressure are all normal. No one knows what's up. Duration now 12 days. Will see a neuroophthalmologist, but not for another 8 days. And with no diagnosis, there's no treatment. Suggestions welcome. Ed says: Even before that, you know what to do. Ed had this one put together before he got sick.] A handful of Canadians get these ThTh postings. Some must even read them, for they respond now and again. Wayne Holst, who has supplied ThTh posts of his own in the past, told me the other day about the recent move to Rome by well-known Canadian Anglican Ian Hunter. I downloaded Hunter's story.

From what I've learned, Ian Hunter is Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Law at Western University in London, Ontario. He has written a biography of Malcolm Muggeridge, and a number of newspaper articles for national papers. One source told me: "His conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism won't have the effect John Henry Newman's did in 1845—when 150 Anglican clerics followed Newman to Rome—though in Hunter's circles he would cause ripples."

The only other person I know in Canadian Anglicanism—and a ThTh reader—is Archdeacon Michael E. Averyt, Diocese of Saskatchewan. I asked him to give me—and also to you on the listserve—his evaluation of Hunter's move and his "apologia pro vita sua" for

why he did so. [Today happens to be the Eve of St. Michael's and All Angels, so hearing from a Michael today is liturgically in order. Why not read the pericope for the day as well? It's proper too, Rev. 12:1-7, the christological cornerstone of that whole bizarre book. Clue: "Mi-cha-el" is a riddle question, expressed in Hebrew: "Who is like God?" The persecuted believers addressed in Revelation knew the One-Word answer to that code-word question. To wit, Whoever that was who threw out the accuser of sinners before the heavenly judge.]

Herewith Hunter's article and then Averyt's thoughts about it.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

This Summer, I Swam the Tiber
by Ian Hunter

[This article first appeared in the September 2006 issue of Catholic Insight.]

This summer I swam the Tiber. Not literally, of course – but theologically, spiritually. I was received into the full communion of the Roman Catholic Church.

Why?

Well, all such stories are long ones, and just as aspects of one's human birth remain mysterious, so also do aspects of one's spiritual rebirth, perhaps opaque beyond human explanation. One does not readily find language appropriate to such experiences. But here is what I know.

In terms of the mechanics, since last year I have taken instruction from a discerning and compassionate priest, to whom I owe much.

As a result of his instruction, and a growing personal conviction that there is no viable Protestant alternative, I am returning – definitely not to the religion of my father (a Calvinist Presbyterian) – but to the religion of my father's fathers.

Who can relate all that impels such a step? Three factors for sure: Rome's authority, historicity, and universality. But more even than these considerations, I have come to believe not just that the truth is to be found within Rome but – something quite different – that in a unique way, the truth is Rome. Incidentally, from within Rome's embrace I do not expect modernity to appear any more comely, but perhaps more bearable.

Unlike much of Protestantism, Rome is innately suspicious of feelings and enthusiasms; still, I can report that my predominant feeling was of a home-coming, of responding to a bell I had long heard toll, of taking my place at a table that had long been set, of finding spiritual companionship among those unashamed to profess the faith of the fathers.

Fifty years after his conversion to Rome, Maurice Baring wrote that it was the single decision about which he had experienced never a moment's regret. I pray that it may be so for me.

I leave the church of my adulthood – the Anglican Church – with mixed emotions; the Anglican ideal, which sought to incorporate the best of the Reformation into Catholicism, still seems to me a worthy – if today largely unnecessary – goal.

Spiritually, I have been nourished by Anglican liturgy, particularly the Book of Common Prayer which, alas, Anglicans

have almost completely abandoned. The trouble is that the more one becomes immersed in the Book of Common Prayer, its 39 Articles, its history, liturgy, and theology, the more inexorably one is led to Rome. This is why John Henry Newman memorably described Anglicanism as “.the halfway-house on the road to Rome”.

I loved, too, the splendid Anglican hymnody, and would be sorry to leave it had it not today been “revised” almost beyond recognition.

I leave with nothing but contempt for what passes for Anglican “leadership”, particularly its Bishops, and many of its clerics, those without seeming conviction about matters of faith or doctrine, although erupting regularly with predictable pronouncements about a handful of social issues; clergy without eloquence or spine when it comes to defending the Christian faith, pathetic creatures, really, who have depleted their spiritual patrimony in the vain hope of looking progressive. By contrast, I have noticed that Rome does not alter its message to suit shifting fashions, nor tailor its doctrine, however persistent or clamorous the public outcry against it may be.

I discovered too that I had grown to believe that only Rome can trace a direct line to the church’s rock, St. Peter. It was to St. Peter, after all, and to his descendants, that our Lord promised that the gates of hell would not prevail. Against most contemporary churches, the gates of Hell seem to be prevailing very well.

When Christians say (in the Nicene Creed) that they believe in “.one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”, they are making apostolicity a cornerstone of belief. I no longer comprehend how denominations which have severed themselves from the apostolic succession they profess, manage to recite the creed.

Nor is this some arcane objection: if the Anglican experience teaches anything, it is that a Church cut off from the apostolic succession, without a real (not a "Let's Pretend") hierarchy, and without the sacred magisterium to guard against heresy, cannot be expected either to preserve or to proclaim the faith once delivered to the saints. Only the Roman Catholic Church, the repository of teaching and traditions that date to our Lord's first disciples, ".the unmoved spectator of the thousand phases and fashions that have passed over our restless world" (Ronald Knox's phrase), has the guts, the inner wherewithal, to survive. Rome's claim to speak with authority in matters of faith and morals is the last refuge, or so I now believe, against the all-corrosive acid of postmodernism.

"Rome, sweet Rome, be you never [Ed. should that be "ever"?] so sinful, there's no place like Rome". So, mockingly, wrote the wisest man I ever knew, Malcolm Muggeridge. A few years later, on November 27, 1982 to be exact, and nearly 80 years old, Muggeridge knelt and was received into the Catholic Church. When I asked him why, he said: "The day will come, dear boy, when you must decide whether to die within the church or outside the church. I have decided to die within the Church." A few years later, he did. And so may I, I pray, when the silence of eternity beckons.

That doughty old warrior, Hilaire Belloc, once wrote to a friend that the Catholic Church was like a landfall at sea, at first glimpsed hazily and only through the mist: ".but the nearer it is seen, the more it is real, the less imaginary: the more direct and external its voice, the more indisputable its representative character . The metaphor is not that men fall in love with it: the metaphor is that they discover home. 'This was what I long sought', they say. 'This was my need'."

I am conscious of a special debt that I owe Catholics, some

virtually unknown to me, who have told me that they had prayed for this day. Such prayers flood the universe with light. I also acknowledge a Christian reading group to which I have long belonged; since all of us admire C. S. Lewis and since none of us is getting younger, we call ourselves “The Wrinklins”. In those long droughts when my own Church provided little or no spiritual nourishment (“The hungry sheep look up and are not fed”, I used to mutter through clenched teeth on innumerable Sunday mornings), I was invariably fed by these – my Christian brothers.

But above all, first, last, and always, Deo gratias.

Ian Hunter

A Response to ‘This Summer, I Swam the Tiber’

There are many legitimate reasons for leaving the Anglican Church and being received into the Church of Rome. I doubt that a week-if not a day-goes by without my considering that action, and open letters such as this one keep me from hiding from the question as to why I, a conservative Anglo-Catholic churchman, continue sunning myself on the banks of the Thames with its garbage polluted waters. But if I do decide to brave the Tiber, I want to be sure it is for the correct reasons.

Mr. Hunter raises several issues in his open letter explaining why he has left the Anglican Communion and been received into the Church of Rome. Obviously much thought has gone into this decision, although the logic is not always clear in his statement.

There are two separate concerns. The first is the decision to leave one ecclesiastical body; the second is to be received into another. One might assume the reasoning behind the two

decisions would be mirrored in the two, but such is not the case.

The apparent cause for leaving the Anglican communion has to do with 'what passes for Anglican "leadership"...those without seeming conviction about matters of faith or doctrine...clergy without eloquence or spine when it comes to defending the Christian faith...in the vain hope of looking progressive.' He continues with the claim that 'Rome does not alter its message to suit shifting fashions, nor tailor its doctrine, however persistent or clamorous the public outcry against it may be.' That may indeed be his experience of Rome, but a cursory examination of church history as reported by such 'conservative' Roman Catholic historians as Eamon Duffy should disabuse him of that fiction. It is a temptation at this point to engage in some hearty Rome-bashing by citing specific examples, but that is neither appropriate nor helpful, and only one without sin dare cast a stone. What is of concern here is that Mr. Hunter seems to be looking for a perfect institution, whose clergy and leadership are perfectly orthodox in faith, morals, and conduct. As long as there are human beings involved in the institution, this is an impossibility, and one wonders what will happen when Mr. Hunter discovers this in his own experience.

Anglicanism, like Rome, condemns the Donatist heresy: the efficacy of the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments according to the Gospel is not hindered by the unworthiness of its ministers, and in that condemnation both Communion recognize the need for this to be clearly stated, because each knows their clergy to be fallible, human beings. Perhaps what really concerns Mr. Hunter is that Rome has a more effective and efficient way of dealing with errant clergy, whereas the Anglican machinery for exercising discipline in such matters has become so rusty with disuse as

to be unusable-a legitimate point.

Lack of discipline may be the reason for leaving Canterbury, but the reason Mr. Hunter opts for Rome is its 'authority, historicity, and universality...Rome is Truth.' 'Only Rome can trace a direct line to the church's rock, St. Peter.' Again, we have an expression of the desire for the perfect institution. Just what is that direct line? A hand on pate succession? An institutional continuity? A consistent apostolicity of teaching? Again, a study of history will demonstrate the logical difficulties here in making such a claim.

It is curious that nowhere in his letter does Mr. Hunter state that the Anglican Church in its formularies (the Book of Common Prayer or the Articles of Religion) has abandoned or contradicted the faith. In fact he speaks positively about them as leading 'inexorably' to Rome. They may lead one to the catholic faith, but to think they lead to Roman Catholicism is erroneous, as may be seen in the Article relevant to this discussion.

Article XIX of the XXXIX Articles of Religion carefully does not bind the visible church to any ecclesial body, institution, or polity: 'The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all things that of necessity are requisite to the same.' In other words, the visible Church is dynamic, it comes into being as a result of a particular activity, viz. when the Gospel is proclaimed and heard and when the Sacraments administered and received according to that Gospel. The operative authority behind this activity is the promise and command of Christ, who chooses to work through the Holy Spirit in the proclaimed word and the administered Sacraments.

I wonder if the authors of this article were thinking about the story of Moses and the seventy elders. Two didn't show up for their ordination service, but God's Spirit fell on them anyway. Anglicans admit that God might very well be working in other ecclesial bodies with different polities and formularies than its own-and working just as effectively 'outside the camp' as within. This is not simple charity, but a theological principle. Like the Eastern Orthodox Churches, we can state with confidence in certain instances that 'This is church,' but we are more reticent to say of others, 'This is not church.' Even conservatives in present day Rome are reluctant to repeat baldly the claims of the Medieval Church that outside of the church which has the successor of Peter as its head there is no salvation. The church's rock is Christ, not St. Peter: Truth is Jesus, not Rome. The church does not exist by the 'authority, historicity or universality' of an institution, but by virtue of our Lord's promise attached to the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Unless Mr. Hunter can demonstrate that the Anglican Church does not in its polity and official teaching proclaim the Gospel in its purity and rightly administer the Sacraments and therefore unable to witness to the Truth, there is no reason to swim the Tiber because 'Truth is Rome'. Scholars tell us that several forms of church polity can be identified in the New Testament. Who can say definitively that only one is de Deo, and the others are false? At the first council, recorded in the Book of Acts, it was St. James that presided, not St. Peter, and the resolution in the conflict between Ss. Peter and Paul in the latter's favour puts paid to any concept of Petrine infallibility.

In summary: *to leave a communion in search of a perfect leadership and clergy is to doom oneself to a never ending search and inevitable disappointment, if not despair. To tie the authority and efficacy of the Gospel to a particular polity*

or institution or anything less than the very promise of Christ is to construct an idol: our faith is in Christ, not an ecclesiastical institution.

*What then would be legitimate reasons for leaving the Anglican Communion? Certainly official repudiation of its understanding of the Gospel as outlined in its formularies would be grounds to leave (assuming those formularies to be true expressions of the Gospel). Yes, there are those in its hierarchy who do contradict its teachings, but that does not of itself destroy the whole. Those who see the truth are obligated to witness to that truth, identify hypocrisy, and work for the reformation of discipline of such individuals rather than running away from the church in its hour of need. Such are also called to suffer the blows for remaining steadfast in their witness to the truth. A mark of the church has never been success, but suffering. Prof Schroeder can say more here about the triumph of the *theologia crucis* over *theologia gloriae*. Being thrown out of the church for one's witness to the truth would also be a legitimate reason for leaving a particular communion.*

Another reason for leaving has to do with the human condition. Because of our fallen nature, we are not always able to see and perceive the Gospel in the proclamation and sacramental ministrations of a particular situation. In these circumstances God works through the scandal of denominationalism to bring all types of personalities and tastes within His saving embrace. But to leave one body for another for this reason is not to pass a judgement on the former's Gospel witness, but merely on one's capacity to overcome certain adiaphoristic barriers to apprehend it. And sometimes individuals in an institution-who might even be acting in the name of the institution-have hurt us so badly that we can no longer hear its Gospel proclamation and we feel the need for our own salvation to separate ourselves to avoid the sins of anger, uncharitableness and the

unwillingness to forgive, so that we can still receive the Gospel proclamation and administration which will eventually, in God's time, transform us and empower us to forgive.

For such in these circumstances Rome may indeed be the place for them-not because she possesses an infallible hierarchy with an unbroken papal pedigree-but because in her preaching and sacramental ministry one is better able to hear God's word and receive the grace one needs to grasp hold of Christ's promise.

In closing, a parenthetical, personal note. In the words above I've tried to be impersonal, sticking to theological principle and reasoning, though I am aware that understanding is not easily separated from the affections. Having personally experienced a major schism in another ecclesial body and subsequently left it for the Anglican Communion for very specific reasons, I am greatly pained by what is now facing the Anglican Church. I know firsthand the damage this does, not only to personal relationships and family, but also to one's faith and spirituality. For those like me, to whom the church means so much, it is a crucifixion to have to give up our desire-our lust-to belong to a 'perfect' institution. But if Christ calls us to give this up, it is only that by entering more fully into the mystery of His passion and cross we might come to rely only on Him, and nothing else.

Archdeacon Michael E. Averyt, Diocese of Saskatchewan

When the Ultimate Promise is Terrifying

Resurrection of Our Lord / Easter Sunday, Gospel, Year C

FAITH RISING

Luke 24:1-12

Resurrection of Our Lord

Analysis by Nathan Hall

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women who had come with him (presumably Jesus, not Joseph of Arimathea) from Galilee] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women

with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.



DIAGNOSIS: Perplexed

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Dead Bodies Don't Wander

Luke is careful to make sure we understand the cause of the women's "perplexity" (literally to be at a loss / to be without the necessary resources). They are perplexed because at the end of chapter 23 these women had gone to the tomb. They had personally seen how Jesus' body was laid. They knew the location. They knew Jesus had been laid in that particular tomb just the day before yesterday. They are completely at a loss to explain what could have happened; dead bodies do not simply

wander off.

We, for the most part, start with the same premise: bodies do not simply disappear. Should a body do so, we would have all sorts of theories about devious activity by a third party. Those of us living in the haze of the Western enlightenment and the metanarrative of the scientific worldview do not have the necessary resources to deal with a body that comes back to life.[1] Perhaps the resurrection leaves us at an even greater loss than it left the women at the tomb; at least in their day there was room for debate over the resurrection (cf. Luke 20:27f).

This perplexity reveals a general low expectation of God's activity in the world. Though those of us Westerners who subscribe to one religion or another do lip service to God's existence, the reality of God is an exception to the rule of our world view(s). So, when the Gospels tell of the signs and wonders Jesus worked in his ministry, a strong contingent of modern Bible scholars would write that off as the superstitious mumbo jumbo of history's simpletons. Likewise, the resurrection is written off: "What we really mean when we talk of Jesus' resurrection," say such scholars, "is that Jesus seems present among us as the community remembers and adheres to his teachings." This is a far cry from a bodily resurrection. This is a far cry from a God who is actively present in creation.



If you are like me, you can acknowledge all of this in your head

and intellectually cling to an active God who is raising the dead to life, but all the while your experience of God in the world is stagnant. Our eyes are clouded over. Daily life trickles by in its usual mundane monotony, and we do not look for a God whose Spirit is actively behind every breath of Creation.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Restless Hearts

When Paul wrote about resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians, it is as though the Holy Spirit also had our present circumstances in mind: “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (15:13-14).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Dead Faith

When Paul wrote about resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians, it is as though the Holy Spirit also had our present circumstances in mind: “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (15:13-14).

The resurrection becomes a stumbling block. If we cannot make room for God working miracles, then our faith is dead. It will not save. And God is not going to work through such a world view. Such a life is nothing but vanity. Down at its roots, the whole Western conception of the world, the system in which so many of us are enmeshed, renders us blind to God’s salvation. We are left to fritter away our days.

PROGNOSIS: Sure and Certain Hope

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Dead Man (Alive

and) Walking

Ultimately the Easter gospel proclaims a new reality. With the women and Peter, we are introduced to a new reality where God is actually present. Jesus is not some apparition (v. 37), or a good story for us to be reminded of. Jesus, in the resurrection, shows himself ultimately in real flesh and bones (v. 39). He is not an idle tale (v. 11). He is living proof that God forgives. He embodies a reality in which God resurrects. God delivers his Son from death in the tomb. And, as incomprehensible as that resurrection is to our mortal minds, God can and does comprehend and conceive it.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Restless Hearts (and Minds) Put at Ease



And this news transforms us. It is not by our own understanding and effort. It is our understanding and effort that landed us in the mess in the first place. For my part, I have not found my Western skepticism of the world's spiritual

liveliness something I easily escape. Rather I feel like the father of the possessed son in Mark's Gospel who cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

And God does help unbelief. For those of us who have a hard time

with faith, God gives the sacraments. In Baptism, God issues a daily reminder that we have been claimed by God. That God is as close to us as a parent is to a child. And that God has raised us up so that we live together in God's righteousness and purity. And, because we are so hard headed, God attaches the promise to water, so that every time we wash we can be reminded that God did rise from the dead, and if we have been united with Jesus in a death like his, we will certainly be united with Jesus in a resurrection like his.

God also helps our unbelief through the sacrament of Communion. It is as though God is saying to us, "You think I am distant and disconnected from Creation. Not so. I am in this bread and this wine. Swallow this, and know that I am in you. I'm down in your guts, coursing through your veins. I am sustaining and nourishing you. I am as close as that."

We were blind to God's present and activity in the world, but now we see. Perhaps what we catch is a glimpse. Perhaps we see dimly. But we get a vision of a world that is different. God breaks through, and our hearts are re-ordered. They are reordered to find fulfillment in that which really satisfies. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God. In getting this glimpse of God for us in Christ, we are filled with faith, hope, love, and other spiritual gifts as well.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Alive to the Possibility

As often as the gospel of Jesus does its work, we are able to make sense of the resurrection. We can see God's vivacious work behind every breath, acorn, and mountain. The world is no longer a stagnant thing to be studied, but a living place filled with God (and perhaps the corresponding spirits at war with God). We should maintain a healthy dose of skepticism towards the

religious charlatans who claim spiritual prowess as a means for building their own standing. But this skepticism is no longer the deadly one that confines God to the outskirts of the cosmos—a mere onlooker. Instead God becomes an ever-present companion in this world. And it is wonderful, but not inconceivable that God would resurrect the dead. We are no longer at a loss and without resource.

[1] I want to be careful to note that science is wonderful. It can study many things and give us much better guesses as to what actually is. It is a worthy pursuit and should be listened to. However, science has limits which I have not often considered by the general populace. Science depends on a meticulous process of carefully controlled experimentation; it is impossible to so control God. But our culture, in a fit of (un)scientific triumphalism, has made assumptions (which the scientific method would never allow) and boldly asserted that the knowledge garnered by science describes all things in the world in their totality. It is this misplaced triumphalism, not science, that renders Westerners dead to the things of God.

Good Friday

CRUCIAL PREPOSITIONS

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Good Friday

Analysis by Jerome Burce

13 See, my servant shall prosper;

*he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.*

*14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—*

*15 so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.53:1
Who has believed what we have heard?*

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

*2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

*4 Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*

*5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*

*6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;*

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

9 They made his grave with the wicked

and his tomb with the rich,

although he had done no violence,

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,

he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

11 Out of his anguish he shall see light;

he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,

and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,

and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;

because he poured out himself to death,

and was numbered with the transgressors;

yet he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors.

Notes: 1) For background to this analysis see "Mrs. Spitzer didn't just stand by, she stood tall," a column by Regina Brett in the March 14, 2008 edition of The Plain Dealer (online for 180 days at www.cleveland.com/brett; thereafter check newspaper archives for stories pertaining to the demise of New York's Governor Eliot Spitzer in the week preceding the above date, with particular attention for comment about his wife). 2) For an

all but final word on the matters at issue in Step 4, see Robert W. Bertram, "How Our Sins Were Christ's," a study of Luther's thought on the most important question in all of Christian theology. <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/HowOurSinswereChrists.pdf>

DIAGNOSIS: When One Stood By

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Mockers*

Last week offered a slap-in-the-face reminder: We post-moderns (are we still that?) are as quick as any ancient to heap abuse on the innocent "stander-by," as in Tammy Wynette (of "Stand by Your Man Fame"), or, suddenly, the New York governor's wife. What's she doing up there all silent and suffering for the world to see? Why won't she validate our contempt for the cad by flashing some contempt herself? Her power to punish is obvious. The more pathetic, then—despicable, even—is her refusal to use it. Should someone argue on her behalf (she opens not her mouth) that loyalty to her wrongdoer is an integral aspect of her innocence, then we argue back that this is surely a culpable innocence, at the least a bad example for spousal victims less powerful than she is. In any case, we add, her humiliation is unsightly, and had she some manners, she'd keep it from public view. Etc. etc., and etc. some more. And in all the yammering, whether from pundit's desk or at the water cooler, those with ears to hear will catch echoes of the scorn that Isaiah describes (53:3) and that Jesus suffered. He suffers it still, of course. Empty are the Good Friday pews in America these days. And why not, says Joe American. This endless replay of the Fool's Death: Who wants it? Who needs it?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *A Yen for Righteousness (version 1)*

“Give me,” says Joe, “some real righteousness.” Good guys beating bad guys. An injured party gutsy enough to hand the creep his head with class and style the way Oprah did a few years ago with that lying author who bamboozled her into selling his fiction as the real thing. “Now there’s a woman for you,” says Joe, not realizing that in saying it he’s exposing the contradictions of his own heart, a heart that hankers for a “righteous one” while simultaneously despising “the righteous one” (53:11b) of whom Joe hasn’t “believed what we have heard” (53:1). Nor does he, for that matter, believe in the project God claims to have in mind for the one he calls “my servant” (53:11b). It seems too much, even for God, to “make many righteous” (53:11b). And from an aesthetic point of view, (a moral one too, perhaps), it would feel much more satisfying were the wicked simply “struck down...and afflicted” (53:4), a great huzzah rocking the rafters as the culprit skulks off the stage and the good guy stands triumphant. You want crowds on Good Friday? Tell a story where Christ comes down from the cross and kicks some major tail. Now there’s an outcome the Joe-in-me would go for.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Poor Dead Joe

Problem is, in such a telling it’s Joe’s own tail that gets booted from here to hell, a one-way trip, no coming back. “All we like sheep,” straying, “have turned to our own way,” (53:6), and no, it isn’t just the randy governor, it’s everyone in the nationwide crowd that exulted last week in his comeuppance (how sweet the hypocrite’s fall!). Among the revelers were other bullies, other adulterers. Among them was Joe, whose flash of righteous indignation had two effects. First, it eased the ache of living with his own habits of transgression (“my lesser sins,” he wants to call them, as if that will help). Second, and simultaneously, it exposed him yet again to God for the hypocrite he also is—as are we all. As is even that silent,

suffering spouse whose own sins, however unrelated to her husband's misbehavior, disqualify her from lodging a claim of innocent victimhood in the one and only court that finally matters, namely God's. In that court no sinner stands tall. All bob, weave, and grovel unsuccessfully. All face the eternal equivalent of the governor's present fate: to be banished from public view, or, as the prophet says it, to be "cut off from the land of the living" (53:8).

PROGNOSIS: When One Stood In

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Poor Dead Jesus

Now comes God own "spousal" dilemma: that governor is God's governor, that Joe is his Joe, that sinner his sinner—no matter that God himself is the one most sinned against. To abandon us to our disgrace is not an option that the "great compassion" or "everlasting love" of this God allows (54:7-8). But neither will it do simply to "stand by" the sinner, or even "with" the sinner; for then the sinner stays a sinner and the sin itself abides. But the situation changes if One can be found to "stand in" on the sinner's behalf, both wearing the sin and destroying it. Enter "my servant" who, in attending to God's sinners, "will prosper" (52:13). That's another way of saying God's servant will succeed, the success coming the moment he's "exalted and lifted up" (52:13) on that obscene cross we nailed him to. No, he's not a pretty sight (52:14, 53:2b). Yes, he wears our sin and eats the wrath and retribution that our sin stirs up (53:4-5, 8b, 10a). Yes, the one who authorizes the violence perpetrated on him is God (53:4b, 6b, 10a), the very God that Joe echoed when he itched to make things right by punishing the transgressor (Step 2). Yes, this Servant's suffering leads directly to our rehabilitation (53:5b). It does so because the sin he dies for—the sin that dies with him—can only be our sin, he himself being the one and only True Innocent (53:9b, Luke 23:47). How innocent is he? So innocent that he never wavers in

his loyalty to God's own sinners; so innocent that his loyalty entangles him in our sin and gets him "numbered with the transgressors" (53:12). So innocent, so loyal, that the sin he dies for includes the sin we'll commit this week as we scorn and ignore him all over again.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Yen for Righteousness (version 2)

Says the Joe-in-me, "You've got to be kidding." Says the God of Good Friday, "I'm not." So what happens when the tellers of that God's Gospel—to them "the arm of the LORD has been revealed"—keep repeating "what we have heard" (53:1)? Well maybe, just maybe, the Joe-in-me starts thinking again. Maybe it dawns on him that he too has an eternal stake in an unsightly Christ who sticks to that ugly cross of his. Maybe it hits Joe that with this Righteous One in the picture, things with him are perfectly right in the only court of opinion (judgment too) that finally matters. Might Joe at that point recall his earlier prayer? He had begged, remember, for some "real righteousness" (Step 2). So now it hits him, how real righteousness is the very thing that God's servant Christ has handed him—no, not the tail-kicking kind he had lusted for, but a new version altogether. The old versopm banishes the transgressor and finally kills him. The new one makes him alive and brings him home. It puts the Righteous One in the exalted position of "divid[ing] the spoil with the strong" (53:12), the strong being every Joe and every Jane who has tumbled into "all-rightness" simply by trusting that Christ has made them so. You want a righteousness that satisfies? This is it, the Real Deal.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : The Mocked

And if all this, as it finally sinks in, puts Joe in a church pew this coming Good Friday for some time of quiet thanks and adoration, great. All the better—better by far—when Joe goes public with his Christ's humiliation; when, that is, Joe wears

that humiliation as his own even as Christ wears Joe's sins as his own. This means that Joe's days of baying for a transgressor's blood are behind him. It means that he starts (or continues) to suffer indignities foisted on him with a patience that strikes others as weak and foolish, to the point of provoking their derision (53:3). It means refusing to bleat when someone does him wrong (53:7). It means demonstrating his own unwavering loyalty to God's other sinners, and at the cost, perhaps, of being falsely branded as an enabler of sin. Incidentally, it also means recalling with awe that governor's wife and the image she presented last week. Dare we suggest that we caught in her a glimpse of that other Sufferer? Or of the sufferer that each of us is called and formed in Christ to be for the sake of every wayward, arrogant, and oh-so-stupid sinner, man, woman, or child?

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Dear Sabbatarians,

This is your lucky day! Today you get three pericope studies for the price of one. This year's lectionary jumps right over Proper 4 and 5 to Proper 6 for next week. The first two are studies by Mike Hoy and the third is by Betty Krafft.

Peace and Joy,
Robin

WHAT MAKES FAITH REMARKABLE

Luke 7:1-10

Second Sunday after Pentecost

(Sunday Between May 29 and June 4
Inclusive)

analysis by Mike Hoy

1After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. 3When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. 4When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, 5for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." 6And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have come under my roof; 7therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it. 9When Jesus hearded this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." 10When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

DIAGNOSIS: "I am not worthy..."

Step 1-Initial Diagnosis: Obligated

One of the elements that sort of jumps out of us in this text is that at no place in this telling of the story do the centurion and Jesus actually meet. In the account in the gospel of Matthew

(8:5-13) and the parallel in the gospel of John (4:46-53), there is a direct encounter. This story, however, is built on the encounters between embassies sent out to meet Jesus. And the first group of embassies, the “Jewish elders,” are intended to be an impressive bunch. Whatever else one might surmise about the centurion, he obviously had connections that ran deep into the Jewish community. They “owed” him one; to him they were obliged or bound (Latin, obligare: to bind). That is, in essence, a relationship of reciprocity. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. For the most part the world has been operating on that kind of system for some time. There is value, even capital, in actions that are undertaken for others that can be redeemed at a later time.

Step 2–Advanced Diagnosis: “Worthy” as unfaith

One of the problems with reciprocity, however, is that it carries its own built-in value-system. The sense of obligation carries its own sense of worth. The first embassies convey this message of worthiness in coming to Jesus: “he is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people; and it is he who built our synagogue.” Fact is, there is nothing inherently wrong on the surface with this remark, any more than understanding that there is value in the system of reciprocity (which has its real origins in divine, left-hand functions). But it does lure people into a false sense of their worth. The value-system of these embassies bases worthiness of one’s deeds. That is a precarious, even unfaithful, foundation.

Step 3–Final Diagnosis: Owing

Perhaps the most problematic message from this story is that God might in fact take this false sense of our worthiness seriously. Jesus does, after all, go with the embassy. But can our sense of worthiness really stand all that much scrutiny? In the final analysis, when all the cards of reciprocity are played out, will the centurion (or any of us, for that matter) really have more

“owed” or more “owing”—to God? Will he and we have debts that cannot be repaid? There is, I suppose, one way to find out. God is on the doorstep. But that may not be to our advantage.

PROGNOSIS: “... but only speak the Word”

Step 4—Initial Prognosis: Authoritative Re-valuing

On the other hand, we should consider just who this Embassy of God is that comes to us. All in this story recognize that Jesus carries divine authority—but how Jesus uses that authority is what makes all the difference in the world. Jesus does not use that authority in the system of reciprocity—at least not directly with us, making us pay for our own indebtedness. He does allow himself, however, to become absorbed in that system of reciprocity in order to overcome it, to antiquate it. People are re-valued by Jesus’ taking their sins upon himself on the cross, such that they are not valued by what they owe but by Who is now their new Owner, Jesus the Christ. That new style of valuing is most certainly to our advantage, because now our sense of being justified is not dependent upon our good deeds but on the merit of Christ, who covers us with wall-to-wall worthiness.

Step 5—Advanced Prognosis: Remarkable faith

How we grasp that worthiness is not by pointing to ourselves, but by our trusting that Jesus’ authority is “enough.” The centurion’s second embassy group, comprised of his “friends” who know best his heart, convey the centurion’s message, “I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.” Nor does the centurion “presume” anything about being acceptable on his own merits. Instead, he recognizes that Jesus outranks him, and this gladly; for in this faithful recognition is the healing of the heart of the centurion and ourselves from all the pitfalls and dangers of self-righteous living and worldly reciprocity. The story of this faith-filled living is reflected also in the Roman Catholic

liturgy just prior to the Eucharist: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you; but only say the word and I shall be healed.” Then we are nourished at the Lord’s table. Our source of being finds its fullness in the healing power of Jesus’s Word that he is our authority-enough. And what is more, Jesus looks upon that faith, and commends it as truly remarkable: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

Step 6–Final Prognosis: Following orders

In addition to the centurion, the slave who is healed does not directly encounter Jesus—but he does have dealings with the faithful centurion. In fact, as in other stories in the gospels, it is the faith of the centurion that actually heals not only himself but the slave—that much Jesus does grant to the power of faith. This is, to be sure, because the faith finds its power source in Jesus. But it is, nonetheless, “our faith” which is “the victory that conquers the world” (1 John 5:4). And living by faith is taking our lead from the path our Captain, Jesus, has trod for the healing of the world.

THE CROSSING OF LIFE OVER DEATH

Luke 7:11-17

(Sunday Between June 5 and June 11 Inclusive)

11Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was large crowd from the town. 13When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” 14Then he

came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

DIAGNOSIS: Death's Passing

Step 1—Initial Diagnosis: Without Support

This account is a crossing of two processions: one a funeral procession, heading out of the city of Nain; the other a procession of Jesus and his disciples headed into the city. The encounter between Jesus and the widow is the focus of the story. While the widow is joined by a whole group of mourners, the widow has more to mourn than the loss of a loved one. Her son was her only means of support, the only means for her having a living (as meager as it may have already been). The emotional support of the crowds is not enough to compensate for the very real depth of loss that she has experienced; but perhaps their going with her, along her procession, is a symbol of the very real threat that could happen to all of us—to be without. Many in our world are already living that way, some because we have made it that way. But all of this very concrete level of being "without" is more than simply emotional or economical—it is a reminder of our own impending death, even theologically. How much does the crowd share in the widow's misfortune?

Step 2—Advanced Diagnosis: Denial (and fear)

Denial is often on the surface of our encounter with such tragedy, but fear is not far from the surface. Psychologist Ernest Becker claimed that the "fear of death" is, in fact, the motivating factor of all human beings; but he also notes how that our egoistic efforts toward success seek to deny death its

due. In other words, our more acceptable worldly practices of denial (even in ceremonial mourning) thinly cover our fear—even though fear may be closer to the truth of where we are at in this procession, and what is really weighing on our hearts.

Step 3—Final Diagnosis: Carried Out

One thing is for certain, all will eventually face the deadly fate and be “carried out.” No amount of stoic heroism or denial can alter the consequences of death’s impending procession toward us. But the largest consequence may be the fact that our fear of death is grounded in our relationship with God. St. Paul calls death “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26). But Paul understood that the real sting of death is that it is God’s carrying us out—like the garbage—because of our sinful, egoistic denial of our relationship with him. And the death-bearers, as Luther rightly pointed out, are the instruments of God’s Law.

PROGNOSIS: Life’s Crossing

Step 4—Initial Prognosis: Carried In/With/By Christ

Death would be too much to face alone, or even with supporting crowds. But what makes the procession unique in this story is that Christ is involved in death’s crossing. He is involved, first, by his deeply shared sense of compassion (anyone can appreciate the gutsy-depth of the Greek word for “compassion,” *spagchna*). Secondly, Jesus risks contamination with death itself, “touching the bier.” Christ is deeply in the world, and into its deadly consequences. But that isn’t the whole of the Crossing. In his contamination with death, death itself—indeed, even the divine judgment in death—“stands still.” The reversal of death’s deadly disease is furthered by Christ’s command, “I say to you, rise!” This victory of new life, even though fully unfolded later in the gospel story, intersects this moment so that death is swallowed up in Jesus’s death, and overcome in his resurrection, here and now, for the widow, her son, and all with

Jesus.

Step 5—Advanced Prognosis: Favored

Fear seizes the crowd; but not fear that is immobilizing. Now the fear can be faced head on, because there is joy to celebrate: “God has looked favorably on his people!” The new status we get to enjoy is the status of being favored—not yesterday’s news (as in the obituaries), but God’s greatest, good news of those who are rescued from a one-way ticket to death. Faith crosses through death and its consequences, grasping that we are regarded as favored darlings in the kingdom of our Lord.

Step 6—Final Prognosis: Giving Support

So favored is this hope that the good news cannot be restrained, “spreading throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.” But what is also noticeable in this story is how Jesus, upon raising the young man from death, “gave him to his mother.” The compassionate love of God in Christ finds roots deeply in our world by our facing the deadly consequences in concrete means of supporting the world. We, who have crossed with Christ from death into life in our baptisms, are given back into the world to be instruments of the favor that God brings. So favored is this hope that the good news cannot be restrained, “spreading throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.”

CHANGING OUTSIDERS INTO INSIDERS

Luke 7:36-8:3

(Proper 6—Sunday Between June 12 and June

18 Inclusive)

37One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37And a women in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner." 40Jesus spoke and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher", he replied, "Speak." 41"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." 48Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." [8:]1Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities; Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their

resources.

DIAGNOSIS: On the Outside

Step 1—Initial Diagnosis: Judging Sinners

This story has a message for all people, whether they are inside or outside of religious institutions. Those inside give every indication of living according to God's will. In this account, the insider is Simon the Pharisee. (He could just as well be Simon the "good Christian person.") Simon regards himself as blessed by God, materially and spiritually. He feels no shame in welcoming Jesus into his home for dinner, together with other guests among the religious elite. The outsider is the woman, who certainly demonstrates courage in entering the home of Simon; but her courage wanes (perhaps because of the rudeness of Simon and his "inside" guests) and she breaks into tears. From Simon's "inside" view, the woman is judged a sinner. Is he wrong? No. But his viewpoint is limited; it can only see the sin of those who are on the outside. This is also true of judgments today by insiders on outsiders who have "made a mess of their lives"—the addicted, criminals, prostitutes. As a result, the religious elite turn their homes (synagogues, churches) into an "insiders-only" club.

Step 2—Advanced Diagnosis: Offended

Insiders and outsiders can find ample reasons to be offended with each other. Insiders may say that they welcome sinners, but the appearance of a "real sinner" like this woman would most likely give offense. By the same token, outsiders may judge the "hypocrites" within religious institutions and not want to have anything to do with them. The relationships between God's creatures are broken; but more importantly, their hearts have picket-fences. They "love little." Furthermore, the offense is compounded by the obvious friendship that Jesus exemplifies with

both parties.

Step 3—Final Diagnosis: Outsiders All

Jesus, however, levels the playing field. The insider Simon and the outsider woman are both indebted (by their sin) before God. The woman had ample reason to know the depth of her debt. Simon, on the other hand, had to be made aware of his debt. He thought he was “correct” in his actions toward Jesus, but he neglected basic hospitality to this stranger. Furthermore, Jesus points out how Simon neglected his hospitality toward Jesus (no water, no kiss, no anointing). Nevertheless, neither the person with the large debt nor the person with the small debt has the ability to repay the damages. Ultimately, the amount of debt is irrelevant. The problem is none of us are ultimately “insiders,” because all of us are on the outs with the divine creditor.

PROGNOSIS: On the Inside Track

Step 4—Initial Prognosis: Forgiven Debtors

What gave the woman courage (faith?) to come to Jesus in the first place, however, is already a sign that there is something different about the divine reckoning that takes place in the person of Jesus. What if Jesus desires to be in the company of the self-convicted “outsiders as well as the inhospitable (and hypocritical) so-called “insiders” (who are also, by divine critical judgment, outsiders also)? What if it’s really true that the creditor, God, cancels the debts of all? That’s what Jesus conveys here. For that kind of cancellation of debts, there is a payment, to be sure. But Jesus is willing to cover that cost in his cross.

Step 5—Advanced Prognosis: Accepted

The woman, then, serves as a model of faithful trust for Simon and for all of us, for we all are former outsiders now with a solid hope of being accepted by God. She trusted that Jesus would not turn her away. Even her tears become more than her

sense of shame for her sin; they are her confession of faith as well, her veneration of her Lord! The hope for us all is secured in the words of Jesus, “your sins are forgiven.” “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Step 6—Final Prognosis: Going in Peace

Outsiders (now insiders) are given a new lease on life, a debt-free life. They are reconnected to one and all, rooted in the forgiveness and peace they have (by faith) in Jesus. Jesus tells the woman to go in peace. But where to go? Into the cities and villages to proclaim the good news. To find other outsiders and bring the word of forgiveness and great connections. Hospitality and welcoming peace are not in short demand.

The Resurrection of our Lord

What Makes the Rejects Sing?

Psalms 118

The Resurrection of our Lord analysis by Ed Schroeder

A Crossings Matrix for Psalm 118, the lectionary psalm for Easter

Psalm 118 is the most-frequently quoted Psalm in the NT, specifically two passages. One is the Easter-focused words about the stone, rejected and then rehabilitated (vv.22-23). The other is the Hosanna chant of the Palm Sunday parade (25-26). Psalm 118 was Luther’s favorite, especially the

Psalmist's gutsy words: "I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord."

In days gone by our Crossings Community had a semester-long course based on this psalm. We built it on the image of the rejected stone and the rejecting builders. Our course title: "What Makes the Rejects Sing?" Much of what follows comes from what we learned then. If you've not used this text before for centering Easter, try it. The N.T. writers did not cite it by accident as witness to their Risen Lord.

Peace & Joy! Ed

Introduction:

Klaus Westermann says (Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible) many of the terms for praise in the Psalms are hard to render into just one term in European languages. They are multivalent. For example the verb YADAH (5x in Ps. 118, vv.1, 19, 21, 28, 29) and its noun form TODAH is praise, give thanks, confess, tell everybody, "hype," and more. St. Jerome chose "Confitemini" as his Latin verb for the psalm's opening word: (colloquially) "Do Todah, y'all." From that Latin word comes our English term "confess," which is itself a multivalent verb. For example, we confess our sins, we confess the faith.

A clue to this multivalence inheres in the Hebrew term. Todah is an act on the part of the believer-receiver in response to a prior word/act from God. So the response is cued to the distinctive act/word from God that triggers it. Simple example: Says God: "You are sinner." We: "We confess our sin." Or again, God: "This is my Son, meant for you." We: "We confess our trust in your Son meant for us." In both cases the receiver is saying "yes" to the prior divine word. The Greek NT term for confess—both for confessing sin and faith—is "homo-logia"

(literally: saying the same thing). So when I confess, I am “same-saying” what God previously said to me. Perhaps the “todah” of the Psalmist in 118 is closest to our idiom of “standing on a soap-box” and then telling everyone within earshot: “Look what God did for/to us!”

The Crossings course on Psalm 118 went like this:

Question: What makes the rejects sing?

Answer: Rejected stones never fit the plans that builders have for their construction projects. That is true of human rejects too. They don’t fit the plans of society’s builders, or church builders, or individuals building their own lives. So stones that don’t fit are necessarily rejected. Yet the rejects have an ally in Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Father of Jesus, the Christ. So the builders, not the stones, are the ones with the big God-problem. At Easter God rehabs his rejected Son, which is good news for all rejects. Easter grounds God’s full-scale program to rehabilitate rejects into his own new building program. That project has a future so bright that the rejects already now are singing and doing their Todah.

The Text’s Diagnosis Of Rejects and Rejectors

Who’s got the problem? Initially it would seem to be the rejects. But given their eventual ally, it is the builders who are also in great jeopardy. And who of us is not a builder?

Stage 1 External

Working definition: Rejection is foreclosing a future for someone without that someone’s consent. All of us are at work on our own building projects. So we necessarily have to reject (in some way) others who “don’t fit.” To be sure, the rejected ones suffer, but it’s no fun either to “have to” reject someone

(i.e., fire an employee, fail a student) who just doesn't fit the blueprints. Even we who get rejected also have a building plan in mind, a future towards which we want to move. Otherwise it would not be so painful when someone forecloses that future by rejecting us.

Stage 2 Internal

Even worse than that, we are imprisoned in our own building plans. We couldn't stop rejecting the misfits even if we wanted to. We believe that we "have to" do it. Says Luther: we do it "ex officio." It's our job assignment. As teacher I "have to" tell a student: "You failed the final exam, you failed the course." No student I ever knew heard that as affirmation. For the rejects, stage two is the temptation to "believe" the rejection as the last word about themselves, maybe even God's last word.

Stage 3 Eternal

The God-problem of the builders is that God rejects rejectors, forecloses their futures—eventually totally—and also without their consent. Also for the rejects who "believe" their rejection as ultimate, what they believe comes true. Fixated on being rejected, they thus "reject" trusting God's "lasts-forever mercy" (Hebrew: "chesed" 5x in Psalm 118, vv.1, 2, 3, 4, 29). When you don't believe it, you don't have it. Not having God's mercy, we have its opposite.

Prognosis Easter's Good News for Rejects and Rejectors

Stage 4 Good News for Stage 3

At Easter God's Christ, himself a Good Friday reject, is rehabbed by the Master Builder. Good news not just for Jesus, but for other rejects as well. Why? Because the resurrected Christ becomes the cornerstone for a whole new building project.

A building for rejects only, a new creation that gives rejects new futures they never dreamed of. Good news for the builders is: Join the rejects. Since the cornerstone is himself a rehabbed reject, all rejects “fit” the blueprints for the program. But will it last? Yes. The “chesed” behind it “endures forever.”

Stage 5 Good News for Stage 2

In place of the false faiths in the hearts of both the builders and the rejects, there now arises: “calling on the Lord” and from that calling comes “freedom, help, salvation, victory, righteousness, and (Luther’s favorite) the confidence that I shall not die but live.”

Stage 6 Good News for Stage 1

“Todah” and singing in the “tents” (=an image of being on the move into those newly-opened futures). “Recounting the deeds of the Lord.” Psalm 118 bears the marks of once being a processional hymn sung while going up to the Jerusalem temple. Christians founded on the cornerstone of God’s new temple sing their Todah on their way out into the world. “Go in peace,” we regularly hear at the close of the liturgy, “serve the Lord—out in the world.” For which our own liturgical Todah is “Thanks be to God!”

Postscript

To last week’s [Sabb. #56 on Phil. 2](#), Gary Simpson (St. Paul, MN) has this add on:

Hi Ed, A quickie addition to your note on Christ’s “emptying.” Luther works the kenosis question in Two Kinds of Righteousness (Phil. 2 is his text) and does so in the way you have noted. He interestingly does think that the Son left something behind (though not, of course, on account of incarnation itself) and he leaves “it” to the Father. Says Martin: “The term ‘form of

God' here does not mean the 'essence of God' because Christ never emptied himself of this. Neither can the phrase 'form of a servant' be said to mean 'human essence.' But the 'form of God' is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness—and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject. He was pre-eminent in such attributes as are particularly proper to the form of God. Yet he was not haughty in that form; he did not please himself (Rom. 15:3); nor did he disdain and despise those who were enslaved and subjected to various evils.

He was not like the Pharisee who said, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men,' for that man was delighted that others were wretched; at any rate he was unwilling that they should be like him. This is the type of robbery by which a man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God's, nor does he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God, sufficient in themselves, pleasing themselves, glorying in themselves, under obligation to no one, and so on. Not thus, however, did Christ think; not of this stamp was his wisdom. He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied himself, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils. And although he was free, as the Apostle says of himself also, he made himself servant of all, living as if all the evils which were ours were actually his own."

Well, there's bushels of theological stuff here that could be investigated and harvested. An oft neglected theme is Christ's relinquishment of self-sufficiency to the Father. Wow! That certainly turns out to be joy-filled Good News for us. But notice in the Pauline text under consideration (2:9-11, which

seems to be the second of a two act drama) how “God” [the Father?] also takes this news of Christ’s non-self-sufficient mind-wisdom-practice: the Father glories in it and even waxes gloriously in it before all creation—such willing non-self-sufficiency. Is the text suggesting a confessional and, indeed, doxological act on the Father’s part? With this sort of glorying going around and with such a cosmic scope, one might wonder whether even the Father might not be willing to relinquish the self-sufficiency stamp?

#766 Ash Wednesday Musings, with a Nudge from Machiavelli

Colleagues,

I’m sticking my neck out this week with a piece that will either please or appall, I don’t know which. I write with Christ’s glory in mind. May you read it in the same light. If there should be argument, let it be about that. What else is there to vaunt?

A reminder that any and all submissions to Thursday Theology will be gratefully received and eagerly reviewed in the hope and expectation that we can pass them along. Do send us yours. Soon.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

To the topic above:

I have a hunch that this is the first time any of you have seen Niccolo Machiavelli associated with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday, after all, is all about sinner's remorse (isn't it?), whereas "Machiavellian" is a synonym for blithe and willful amorality, at least in the spheres of politics and governance, yes?

Or might it be that common usage has done old Niccolo an injustice? And while I'm at it, is Ash Wednesday really meant to drive us into beating our breasts and changing our ways, or is it better observed when the focus is somewhere else?

I got to thinking about both these things last weekend after reading David Brooks's regular column in the Friday edition of the *New York Times*. Under the title "[Florence and the Drones](#)" (Feb. 8, 2013), he laid out a quick summary of insights gained from a recent week of reading Machiavelli for a course at Yale.

Two things jumped out at me. The first was Machiavelli's Luther-like appreciation for the hold that self-interest has on the human heart. I don't suppose he knew or used the term *curvatus in se* (turned in on oneself), but, according to Brooks, he described to a "T" what human behavior looks like when this happens to be the essential condition of the beings in question. It isn't pretty. Effective rulers, said Machiavelli, will understand this. They'll operate accordingly. After all, effective ruling means starting with facts on the ground, a point, as it happens, that Luther made about useful theology (thus Burce, not Brooks). Neither ruler nor theologian will do us much good if they base their work on notions plucked from somebody's theoretical stratosphere. A down-to-earth grasp of sin's nature and ubiquity is of the essence in both spheres of endeavor. (Come to think of it, Luther and Machiavelli were contemporaries, Luther the younger by fourteen years, both breathing the intellectual airs of the day. That their operative

assumptions might overlap at points should not be surprising.)

Next Machiavellian point: it takes a virtuous leader to handle a brutish populace. Yes, you read that right. Brooks insists that Machiavelli was very big on virtue and high ideals, only—

*“he just had a different concept of political virtue. It would be nice, he writes, if a political leader could practice the Christian virtues like charity, mercy and gentleness and still provide for his people. But, in the real world, that’s usually not possible. In the real world, a great leader is called upon to create a civilized order for the city he serves. To create that order, to defeat the forces of anarchy and savagery, the virtuous leader is compelled to do hard things, to take, as it were, the sins of the situation upon himself.”*The leader who does good things cannot always be good himself. Sometimes bad acts produce good outcomes. Sometimes a leader has to love his country more than his soul.”

“Wow,” says the pastor-theologian who thinks in furrows plowed by Luther. Gutsy stuff, is it not? Especially if he’s being serious, not flippant, about souls hanging in the balance. All the more gutsy if he’s daring his prince to wing it on his own without counting on a crucified, sin-bearing King to catch him when he falls, as indeed he must and is bound to. I wonder if Machiavelli knew anything at all of last night’s second text, that incredible assertion at the end of 2 Cor. 5: “[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, that we might become in him the righteousness of God.” If and when I ever get around to browsing his writings, that’s what I’ll be looking for, though not expecting to find it.

In the meantime, thanks to Brooks, I think I’ll admire Machiavelli for a while. Caveat: does he still scare me? Sure, for reasons Brooks turns to at the end of his column. Princes

too are sinners—"venal self-deceivers" in Brooks's phrasing—and such creatures have a habit of turning monstrous under the kind of burdens that Machiavelli would have them bear. Still, I do wish that Christians were as clear-eyed as Machiavelli is about the sheer impossibility of tiptoeing through life in a sinners' pigpen without getting dirty. Instead, visions of Moses-style righteousness keep dancing through Christian heads, and they keep attempting to live those dreams. I imagine Machiavelli would regard that as both stupid and irresponsible, and I'd have to agree with him. So would that Prodigal Son par excellence who entered the pigpen not to beat on its denizens but to join them at the trough. As it is written, "This fellow welcomes sinners, and eats with them" (Lk. 15:1). Then he went to his death, tarred with their stink, made to be sin for the sinners, as Paul puts it. Paul also calls this the "act of righteousness" that pulls the rabbit of a saint's future from the hat of a sinner's fate (Ro. 5:18). That other fellow in sixteenth-century Wittenberg who got what this was all about was moved, so we're told, to tell a prissy colleague to get over it and sin boldly. Had Machiavelli caught wind of this way down there in Florence, he might have added, "Sin wisely while you're at it." Or so I'd like to think.

And here's another thought I toss your way: isn't daring to sin for the sake of the sinner a piece of what Jesus has in mind when he tells us to take up our crosses and follow him? I say this gingerly. I don't mean to suggest that Machiavelli's political proposals are the kind of sinning-for-the-sinners'-sake that our Lord would have in mind. I will submit that we cannot be for others as Christ was and is for us without incurring guilt under the Law of God, thereby earning the cross we carry. Muse on that this Lent, if you would. If you think I'm all wet, feel free to tell me. A bit of back-and-forth debating in these postings might be fun for a change.

Let me add that this is much more than a matter for abstract contemplation. It cuts directly to facts on the ground of the sort that Machiavelli was so well attuned to. For example, either we suck it up as sin-bearers-for-sinners or we make the kind of mistake LCMS President Matthew Harrison stumbled into last week when, to mollify the pure-doctrine crowd in his ranks, he called the synod's young pastor in Newtown, Connecticut on the carpet for having risked a benediction amid doctrinal sinners at the community's post-Sandy Hook mourning event, the one the U.S. president attended. To his enormous credit, President Harrison later apologized for having done this. May he pardon me for citing the incident even so to illustrate how a yen for righteousness will yield unrighteousness; how a horror of sin can multiply sin. ELCA Lutherans have their own assorted ways of falling prey to this. So does every other Christian tribe that I'm aware of.

Or ponder this: by all reports no one in the world today is hungrier for law-centered righteousness or more eager to escape the stain of other people's sin than the Taliban.

Which brings me at last to Ash Wednesday, which ought to be of great help to Christians in this matter, but usually isn't. What is this service if not a contemplation—or better, a proclamation—about the inextricable pickle we sinners are in. Dust we are, to dust we shall return, and there's not a thing we can do to change that. At this point the only thing that matters is the cross that the ashes advertise when they're painted on the forehead.

Only then the talking begins, and wouldn't you know, so much of it ignores the cross and touts instead the penitent's Johnny-come-lately turn into better behavior, as if God Almighty is going to be impressed by that. As if more fasting, more prayer, and the giving of more alms are what the death sentence is meant

to educe. And if that kind of preaching hits its mark, what you get is uptight clean-freaks who are scared to death of wading in the mud where sinners wallow, thereby defying the Lord who sends them there. Please! Will we not preach Christ and his singular righteousness and be done with it? On this day of days, what else is there to offer that's of any use at all to anyone? How else do we ever find the nerve and freedom to take the counterintuitive plunge, in Christ and with Christ, into being sin for the sinful neighbor's sake? To what else is the Holy Spirit calling us?

Something for all of us to think about, perhaps, before the next Ash Wednesday rolls around.

Jerome Burce

The day after Ash Wednesday, 2013