Easter Unfolding. A Gift from Amy C. Schifrin. Part 1

Colleagues,

I started some weeks ago to pass along the superb presentations we heard at the Crossings Conference this past January. You've gotten two of them so far. When I looked again at the one you're receiving this week and next (again, in two parts), I was startled to see how well it serves as a reflection on the Gospel text we heard in church this past Sunday, Easter's Second. It was, you'll recall, that great Johannine report of Easter Evening. Suddenly there stands Jesus amid cowering disciples, declaring his peace, showing his wounds, and imparting the Holy Spirit. Keep this in mind as you read what follows—and notice how Amy Schifrin elucidates how this very work of Christ continues to unfold amid the bands of feckless disciples that we belong to and serve today.

Dr. Schifrin is the president of North American Lutheran Seminary, where she also serves as Associate Professor of Liturgy and Homiletics. Thanks be to God for her Easter witness.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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"Fill us with your Spirit to establish our faith in truth"[i]

Crossings International Conference on

Law, Gospel and the Holy Spirit

Dr. Amy C. Schifrin

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15 *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* ***16*** *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.* ***17*** *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. John 14:15-17*

6 *"This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.* ***7*** *There are three that testify:* ***8*** *the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. 1John 5:6-7*

O Holy Spirit, enter in,
And in our hearts your work begin,
And make our hearts your dwelling.
Sun of the soul, O Light divine,
Around and in us brightly shine,
Your strength in us upwelling.
In your radiance
Life from heaven,
Now is given
Overflowing,
Gifts of gifts beyond all knowing.[ii]

The task given for this lecture was discerning the Spirit in the double-life of the Congregation. *Gift of gifts beyond all knowing*. I read the title and I started to laugh, because in 30+years of serving as pastor in parish, campus and seminary communities, I believe that I have encountered not simply the double-life, but more than 50 shades of the good, the bad, and

the ugly. Double-life doesn't even touch it. I've even served multiple point parishes where one congregation was all sweetness and light (well, almost all) but their yoked partner truly resembled an evil twin. (This was most evident when one church council met on Tuesday evening and the other, on Wednesday.) Yet in every assembly, baptisms were performed, sins were confessed, Scripture was studied, preaching was heard, and an epicletic word was prayed at the Eucharist. Jesus kept putting his life into ours.

Congregational cultures are forged over time. Multiple generations are sometimes led by lay leaders or a succession of long-term pastors who may have ruled with an iron fist. Whether you're in a small town or a large city, your congregation has a culture, a way of doing things that carries remnant of its history and relationships (either by subconscious agreement or in conscious rebellion). 40 years in a wilderness seems like a mere breath compared to 80 years bent-over by hearing someone's misinterpretation of a law that neither you nor even Jesus could fulfill. Faith becomes the parched hunger of one on a desert march, the slow death between just enough hope, and a despair that is unacceptable to express in public. And now in more recent times, I have also encountered an anger born of fear that runs like an apocalyptic undercurrent, that somehow, someone, some force was going to take this congregational culture away, and in taking it away, the church would no longer exist. At the very bottom of that fear was threat of both collective and individual abandonment that would end with death having the final word, for abandonment is the foretaste of a life that is the dust of the grave.

There are a variety of reactions to such a deadly spiral in many parts of the American church context, some which de-center the apostolic witness in favor of 'enlightened,' non-hierarchical sociological principles of democracy, in which almost every

voice heard is equal (I say almost because it is a selective diversity); and the obverse reaction (a modern equivalent of Rome's bread and circuses) that projects the same fear onto those who are moving the culture of the political arena to a particular brand of "left," and in response provide a Sunday morning entertainment industry with enough fodder to numb the mind 24/7 through radio, cable, so-called "felt-need" bible studies, and the ever-ubiquitous internet. You can sing upbeat "Christian" songs 'til the cows come home, and then when your voice gives out you can just post your favorite slogans on Facebook to let your world know your brand of Christian identity.

While no congregation is immune to these forces, the church is still alive. In the warp and woof, the cultural and ecclesiastical yin and yang that pulls and tears a fabric to shreds, and in spite of all the ways that any expression of the church can go astray, there are yet faithful people hidden within the love that heals, carried in the Holy Breath of the One God who brings all things to life, witnessing to a mercy so great that stones are rolled away. Folks who really are holding on to life by a thread are held in that gorgeous embrace of prayer and love—those sighs too deep for words. And being upheld in ways which the world can neither measure nor contain, they discover whom God created them to be. *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.* I think back to my own life as a college student, when I had the self-esteem of a flea, yet the people in a little Lutheran campus congregation saw in me the person whom God intended for me to be, and treated me as such. Their quiet, actions, unnoticed by the world, were a catechesis of love, and lo, and behold, I came to life. I grew into the person whom God had created me to be through their love, and I began to speak, to bear witness to the incarnate God, who had been made present

to me in their voices and their hearts. Through the years folks have occasionally asked me to describe what grace is, and while the thickness of meaning has grown, my answer has never changed from those early days: Grace is breathing after death. Grace is breathing after death.

Such life in the Spirit is deeply hidden. It is impossibly hard for the world to see, because like a seed that falls into the ground, it is only known when it bears fruit. And given all the visible divisions, all the enmity between peoples within and without the church, from congregational squabbles to ecclesiastical sabotage, the world cannot see any unity, nor on its own is it capable of receiving a taste of the church's good fruit.

In the United States alone we are now culturally divided into 11 geographic/sociological regions from 'Yankeedom' to the Left Coast to the Tidewaters to the Midlands.[iii] People are desperate for an identity. Within each of these "existential" regions (regions with which people's identities are formed and normed) are economic variants, age variants, political variants, religious variants, educational variants, and cultural, historically ethnic, and racial variants. The continuum of rural, small town, suburban, an urban dwelling places means that children born the same day in two different places within the same country, and maybe even to parents within the same church body, may grow up to hate each other, or just as deadly, be apathetic towards one another, having no recognition that this is my neighbor.

What is so spectacular, however, is that underneath every fad and every division, every "ism" and every little tad of self-righteousness, every fear and every failure, every hushed duplicity and every false bravado, every wrong decision and every haughty glance, He who created us in his image and

likeness is still at work in us, breathing us into the future that he is binding and knitting together through our sacramental life. For while the Old Adam/Old Eve in each of us is still looking to go astray, He who is life itself is bringing goodness where we on our own could never even imagine it.

The church is hidden in, with, and under this mix of peoples who make up a nation and who, for all intensive purposes, have no unifying meta-narrative. As a nation we are a people without a sense that what is true for me is also true for you. The church herself, which has a meta-narrative, (God ruling by his Word) becomes increasingly hidden in this multivalent context, for the layers of human brokenness and division are like scales seared on our eyes, keeping us from seeing who we really are together as God's beloved creation. Until, like St. Paul, we are led by God's grace to a dirt-filled Damascus street where there a faithful, unassuming brother of the church prays, so that we may regain our true sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 9:17) Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit, this is the work of God when murderers (as we all are) die to ourselves and come to proclaim the sovereignty of Jesus, *He is the Son of God*. For until this world tastes death, it cannot hear such love.[iv]

Alexander Schmemann, the great Orthodox theologian states it clearly,

The world rejected Christ by killing him, and by doing so rejected its own destiny and fulfillment. Therefore if the basis for all Christian worship is the Incarnation, its true content is always the Cross and the resurrection. Through these events the new life in Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is "hid with Christ in God," and made into a life "not of this world." The world which rejected Christ must itself die in man if it is to become again means of communion, a means of participation in the life which shone forth from the grave, in the kingdom which is not

"of this world," and which in terms of this world is still to come.[v]

As in the world before ultrasound, when we could not see the details of a child in the womb that was coming into this world, we receive our Lord in an incarnate promise: a promise that holds the power of life eternal, a promise that will crush the serpent's head, a promise that is hidden in the life of the baptized, a promise that the light will shatter the darkness, a promise that the leprosy that infects the human heart will be washed clean, until that great day comes when we sing with all the saints in glory, the resurrection song. And what is so stunning is that people who do evil to one another still are given this vision of the good, calling them to live in the light, to live as the light. *Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*.

This is the work of the Spirit, a ministry of reconciliation, where words of forgiveness break through that boulder stuck in our throats (that stone, too, needs to be rolled away), where we give not only the outgrown and outdated clothes to the Salvation Army, but we spend hours in what the world calls "leisure time" building furniture for the local homeless shelter or quilting for 1 of 19 million refugees. Where we step out beyond our fear to see someone of a different race or socio-economic class, or even a different religion, as a beloved child of God as we are. Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit: It's all at work here when we are faced with both our finitude and our complicity in another human beings pain and sorrow. And then…and then from our knees, we begin to love. Then we can participate in myriad expressions of service to the neighbor, joyfully—not because we have to, but because we want to. And where in our everyday vocational callings, that which world calls our "professions," we work in personal and collective ways to treat everyone, absolutely

everyone, with the dignity and respect befitting a child of God. Some of us may also do the most hidden work of renewing and creating systems that make life more joyous for people we will never meet. Your incarnate witness will serve as a word of law to those who don't care for their neighbor, and an embodied grace to those who receive it. Giving glory to our Father in heaven is always the work of the Spirit.

Such a life does not call attention to itself and has no need to mimic a world that needs to name its company on its polo shirts and its favorite quarterback on its jerseys. Such a life has no need to succumb to a tribalism that seeks to destroy our true identity, the identity given to us when the water was poured and the word spoken—*one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one God and Father of us all*. (Ephesians 4:5) For such a life does not easily fall prey for those devilish forces that divide brother from brother, sisters and mothers, fathers and cousins all.

—to be continued.

[i] Apostolic Tradition, Prayer of Hippolytus, Eucharistic Prayer IV, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 226.

[ii] Text: Michael Schirmer; tr. Catherine Winkworth; Tune: Philipp Nicolai, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), Hymn 459, vs. 1.

[iii] http://www.businessinsider.com/the-11-nations-of-the-united-states-2015-7

[iv] "The point of [the law/gospel] distinction is once again the making public of the divine deed, making it hearable in a

world that will not hear it. The distinction is made so that a new kind of speaking might be heard in this world: gospel speaking…Proclamation, shaped by the theology of the cross, is governed by the distinction between law and gospel. This distinction comprehends the fact that publication of the electing deed cannot proceed directly to the world that crucified Jesus, but must bring it to an end." Gerhard Forde, "Called and Ordained," in Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden, eds., *Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 122, 128.

[v] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 122.