

Loving Beyond Barriers

Colleagues,

During the past two weeks ([ThTheol #729](#) and [ThTheol#730](#)) we presented the introduction and first main section of Dr. Michael Hoy's 2011 paper, "Like Living Stones: Chips of the New Rock: Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans." In last week's section, Mike focused on the risks inherent in living a life of Christian faith. This week we give you the final section of Mike's paper, in which he reflects on love as a fruit of that faith, with an emphasis on taking that love out into the world.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"'Like Living Stones': Chips of the New Rock" Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans Central/Southern Illinois Synod, ELCA June 2-4, 2011

2. How do we bring our faithful love to bear upon God's world today? (Luther: "love toward one's neighbor")

- a. A Kelly Fryer segue. Whenever I need a good zinger, like on a Friday afternoon, Kelly Fryer has one to offer. Take this one from her book, *Reclaiming the "C" Word: Daring to be Church Again*, where she comments: "We have made an idol of church unity. We put in our time and pay our dues and do everything we can to make sure nothing threatens the church we love. We silence dissent. We fend off

controversy. We avoid conflict. We shun risk. We tolerate even the worst behavior if it means keeping the peace. We choose the safe thing, even when we know in our hearts it isn't the right thing. Hell-bent on protecting 'the church,' it even gets difficult for us to hear anymore as the world outside our doors cries out for help, for wholeness, for justice, and for a God who can make things right. It becomes almost impossible to see people out there who are dying not only of hunger, but of hopelessness. We pour so much of our energy into keeping things together in here that it's no wonder we have so little left for the world out there." [Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the "C" Word: Daring to be Church Again*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 5.]

I hear her, loud and clear. Moreover, this particular point that she is making is directed to mainliners like you and me. Still, does she mean "church unity" or does she really mean the church that prizes their fortress walls-behind which they remain united? It seems evident, as one reads on, that it is the latter to which she objects—and I would say, correctly. But the Reformers did not understand their unity as playing their cards close to the vest. They took risks, even boasting how they "were among the first to arrive" at Augsburg, precisely because they valued the cause of Christian unity. [AC, Preface, 5.]

What they objected to is how that unity was founded on an alien foundation, not on the "authority enough" (*satis est*) for the church's union, namely, the gospel and sacraments. [AC 7; cf. also AC 5.] These gifts, however, empower the Christian community, as we even proclaim in one of our offertory prayers, "With [these gifts-and I take that to mean not just our money but also, more

significantly, bread and wine and all that we bring before the Lord's table]"—with these gifts “we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.” “Care” is old-kingdom talk for justice; “redemption” is new-kingdom talk for mercy. Both are part and parcel of what our lives of love are going to look like for the sake of our neighbor—loving justly, and loving mercifully.

So, as Fryer says, we need to get “out there.”

- b. Love does not make us right; but does it make “right” for our neighbor—also at Augsburg, 1530? Today? We are so well versed in our central Lutheran teaching that we are “justified by faith” that we have, more often than we care to admit (again, repentance is in order), neglected the fruits of faith. I will not belabor the long and hoary history of quietism in Lutheranism—others have already done so quite well.

[Note: Karl Barth, for example, properly disgraced Lutherans for conceding the integrity of the gospel in this bifurcation—or separation—of the kingdoms of the church and state rather than seeing how Christian discipleship impels us to be Christians in the world. Many a Lutheran church in this time—with some exceptions—stuck to their own Sunday morning business, and separated itself from the secular work of addressing the Fuehrer, basing their premise on what they had heard even from Luther centuries before, and prior to that from Paul's letter to the Romans: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” (13:1) Never mind the atrocities of evil that were being committed under his reign, while Lutherans sat by

and let the status quo continue. One can understand Barth's rage. However, there were some Lutherans during the conflict with Nazism who made the bold confession and were martyred. Recently, the Roman Catholic church has decided to beatify three Catholic priests from the city of Lübeck, but not the Lutheran pastor Karl Friedrich Stellbrink who stood with them in their bold defiance. A religious news commentator added, "The Vatican's decision to beatify the three priests on June 25—but not Stellbrink—is testing the ecumenical spirit, and some religious leaders worry that the event could drive a wedge between the two communities." The historical irony of this comment, and on June 25 no less, the day when the Augsburg Confession was publicly proclaimed in 1530, is even more remarkable. Omar Sacirbey, "Rome to beatify anti-Nazi priests, but not a Lutheran," *Christian Century* (May 17, 2011):19.]

To be sure, the Reformers clearly understood that faith and love were part and parcel of the Christian life. Philip Melanchthon, in his *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, contended, "Thus good works ought to follow faith as thanksgiving toward God. Likewise, good works ought to follow faith so that faith is exercised in them, grows, and is shown to others, in order that others may be invited to godliness by our confession." [Apol. IV, 150:188. Cf. Michael Hoy, *The Faith that Works*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995).]

Even Luther understood that when newborn infants long for the pure, unadulterated milk, it is not so that they can continue to fatten up on the promise and let the world go however it will. Their faith grows to also them to risk new encounters with their neighbors. So Luther would encourage those who have been so nourished: "No one should

deal unfaithfully and falsely with the other person.... Christians must deal uprightly and with purity of heart, not perfidiously, with people as well as with God, fair and square, so that no one overreaches the other person in selling, buying, or promising and the like." [LW 30:47-48.] Usury, for example, was a particular evil in Luther's day, and from what I can see it hasn't dissipated too much today.

The problem of usury is a justice issue. But then, so was the pursuit of civil rights. So was overcoming apartheid in South Africa. So was the denial of the gospel's integrity during the Third Reich. Many faithful confessors could also see that as the church hierarchy went along with or even supported the status quo of all these injustices of history; they also came to confess that there is something also about the gospel—beyond justice—that is also at stake: the gospel of freedom (Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963), the gospel of hope for equality of brothers and sisters (Kairos Document, 1985), and the promise of Christ's Lordship that prevails above all other pretenders (Barmen Declaration, 1934).

However, even if there is not a gospel issue at stake, per se, Christians take seriously that justice is God's justice. And no one should understand that better than the Christian who, in a proper understanding of the two kingdoms, knows that even though there is judgment in justice, Christians—along with all others—have the calling and obligation to advocate, support, and strengthen the neighbor in love.

Notice how it is in 1 Peter. In the verses that immediately follow those of our assembly text, the author

encourages the believers to honor those in secular authority because of their work “to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right” (2:14); and later he goes on to say, “Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (2:17) What we should note from this is the imperative to fear God but not to fear the emperor. Honor him, sure, for doing the work that God has given him to do; but don’t be afraid of him. That may also mean humbly and respectfully holding the emperor accountable for what that divine work is—emperors have been known to forget.

- c. What might such love look like? There are several citations of 1 Peter 2 in the confessional writings. But the most detailed reference occurs in Apology IV, the very article having to do with how we are justified by faith.

[Note: 2 Peter 2:1-10 occurs in the following contexts in the confessional writings: 2:4-6: Apology IV (justification), on faith and love (the text in consideration above); 2:5: Apology XXIV (the mass) and FC VI (third use of the law), both on the meaning of “spiritual sacrifices” as sacrifices of praise, preaching of the gospel and faith, “Christians not under the law but under grace”; 2:6: Apology XII (repentance) and Apology XXI (on believing in Christ as the basis of righteousness, not works, nor through the saints); and 2:9: TPPP (the church has the right to choose and ordain in a time when regular bishops being enemies of the gospel).]

One of the critics of the Reformation was the German Franciscan Nicholas Ferber of Hebron. Even though Ferber was not an intellectual match for some of the other critics of the Reformation, like Johann Eck or even Desiderius Erasmus, the Reformers took their critics seriously—also, by the way, a sign of faithful love—and Ferber was no exception. Now, we need to be honest in

saying that the Reformers were not holier-than-thou in their remarks, which were often enough punctuated with expletives—and neither are these foreign to the confessional writings, Luther's especially. But it is also true to say that the Reformation was a polemically charged environment; and given the abuses and injustices and even slayings suffered, the Reformers did their best to put the best construction on their critics.

It was Ferber who cited the passage from 1 Peter 4:8: "Love covers a multitude of sins." And by this he meant, See, it is love, not faith, that makes us right with God! Melanchthon could see that the real problem with this reasoning had to do with hermeneutics—how does one interpret the Scriptures? From many of the texts cited against the Reformers, the Scriptures were being read and interpreted through a legalistic lens—what the Reformers called *opinio legis* (leaning toward the law). It comes so natural so to read the Scriptures—natural in the sense of our Adamic nature. When so reading the Scriptures, we miss the message of the one Foundation in Jesus the Christ and his benefits.

[Note: Later on in the Apology, Melanchthon would address Ferber again for citing the passage from Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders" (Hebrews 13:17). Melanchthon responded, "This statement requires obedience under the gospel; it does not create an authority for bishops apart from the gospel. Bishops must not create traditions contrary to the gospel nor interpret their traditions in a manner contrary to the gospel." *Apol.* XXVIII, 291:19-20.]

Such legalistic reading of the Scriptures is still a current practice, wherever the message is "do this, and you shall live." I hear it in the prosperity gospel that

often sounds like Dr. Phil with a religious zeal; I hear it in the religious-right message of how to get to dominance and victory over all your enemies; and I also hear it in the religious-left message where “Jesus said it” comes out sounding more like a club over the head rather than an invitation to pick up his cross and follow him, trusting that he has already gone ahead for you so that you may follow confidently. Legalism never helps anyone—it’s not even good Law; and it certainly does not give honor to Christ and his benefits for his hearers. So Ferber’s message, “love covers a multitude of sins,” was this same kind of legalism: if you love, you make yourself right with God.

So Melancthon went on to interpret Scripture evangelically for his critics:

“It is evident that Peter is ... speaking about love toward the neighbor because he connects this passage to the text that commands love for one another. Indeed, it could not have entered the mind of any apostle to say that our love overcomes sin and death; or that love is an atoning sacrifice on account of which God is reconciled apart from Christ the mediator; or that love is righteousness without Christ the mediator. For even if there were such a love, it would be a righteousness of the law rather than of the gospel, because the latter promises us reconciliation and righteousness when we believe that on account of Christ as the propitiator, the Father is gracious to us, and that the merits of Christ are bestowed upon us. Therefore a little earlier Peter urges [1 Peter 2:4, 5] us to come to Christ so that we might be built upon Christ. And he adds [1 Peter 2:6], “Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Our love does not free us from shame when God judges and accuses us.

But faith in Christ does free us in the midst of these fears because we know that on account of Christ we are forgiven.” [Apol. 4:238-239.]

And then, having laid this Foundation solidly in faith, Melanchthon goes on to show how this justifying faith encourages us to love others:

“Thus, this text does not speak about one’s own sins, but of others’ when it says, ‘love covers sins,’ namely, the sins of others, more precisely offenses between people. That is to say, even though these offenses flare up, love conceals them, forgives, yields, and does not carry everything to the fullest extent of the law. Peter ... means that in human relations love is not obstinate, harsh, or intractable; instead, it overlooks certain mistakes of its friends and puts the best construction on even the more offensive conduct of others, just as the common proverb admonishes, ‘Know, but do not hate, the conduct of a friend.’ It is not without reason that the apostles speak so often about this responsibility of love, which the philosophers call ‘fairness.’ For this virtue is necessary for preserving public harmony, which cannot last long unless pastors and churches overlook and pardon many things among themselves.” [Apol. 4:242-243.]

The last time we were together at Synod Assembly, there were many other dear brothers and sisters who are not with us this year. Many of them are dear friends and colleagues. I grieve their departure. And I grieve also the departure of my own dear doctor father, Carl Braaten, from the ELCA. To be sure, there were words spoken in these halls that were less than loving, and not only from those who departed. That is why I also applaud the

risking, confessing voice of my dear friend and colleague, Pr. Bill Pierce, who came up to the microphone and led us all in a prayer of repentance:

"Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen."

Such penitential love understands that perhaps we all might have listened better, might have found better ways to express ourselves, might even have considered how better to maintain the unity of the body of Christ in faith while also at the same time not ceasing to reach out in love that also bears some penance for all who have been estranged from the church and made to feel unwelcome, even in spite of the gospel's own open arms.

While we follow the apostolic encouragement to rid ourselves, for our own good, of our own evil, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander, there is never a time in which we say "good riddance" to a neighbor. There is a desire to maintain the unity of faith and love in the community of Christ's church, and through the church for the world. Through faithful loving, "even though these offenses flare up, love conceals them, forgives, yields, and does not carry everything to the fullest extent of the law;" and through love, one also presses on toward the goal of "preserving public harmony, which cannot last long

unless pastors and churches overlook and pardon many things among themselves.”

Healing love is what the “living stones” do as they seek to model THE Living Stone Jesus the Christ—healing one another ultimately from our own despair, and healing the world also, which cries out for that same kind of healing.

- d. Got [spiritual] milk? In conclusion, there is today a tremendous missional challenge ahead of us. There are problems of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, greed, environmental damages that we have created, tragedies that many have suffered, racism, sexism, political and religious exclusivism, and even a fair amount of imperialism—and if that is not enough, we find many of these things either supported or overlooked by the very power structures that should be keeping us all accountable. It is an awesome task.

It may help to start facing and ‘fessing up to our common humanity with our brothers and sisters, understanding as we do, even theologically, what it means to be losers, to be “no people” and “without mercy.” But we do so because we have a promise that holds us dear, that makes us “God’s people” with “God’s mercy,” and now get to confess that promise by faith and to live it with love.

There is a common theme in all of this, one that we may see with some regularity in magazines or on billboards or in TV commercials: Got milk?

The question’s too good to resist. For a thirsting world, we who are fed and nourished on the pure spiritual milk of Christ’s gospel, have an answer that is both faithful and loving, even full of Easter’s joy that bursts the walls of death.

How dare we risk it with all the risk it takes?

By trusting in the One who risked all for us.

How, then, should we love?

As the penitent and forgiven living stones, chips of the New Rock—which He so dearly makes of us all.

M. Hoy

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