

Proclaiming the Good News

Colleagues,

[Here's one that's been in the hopper for a while. Since February, I think. It never went out into cyberspace for reasons I can no longer remember. So it comes your way now.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Marie and I spent most of February this year “down south” from Alabama to Florida where temperatures were 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Returning to the heartland, it was still not spring and temps were in the thirties. On the three Sundays we were away we were in three different states, attending worship at three Lutheran congregations (one LCMS, two ELCA)—all of them under the pastoral care of my own former students.

Preaching THE Gospel is not an easy task. Made even more of a challenge on those three Sundays when all the sermon texts came from Matthew 5 and 6, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he radicalizes, interiorizes—and finally, “impossible-izes”—any human attempt to fulfill God's law. Yes, there are clues within Jesus' own three-chapter sermon about a “better” righteousness, better than the defective one that comes with legal performance. But you have to be alert to hear those signals, and it takes work to get them out in the open and into the prominence that Matthew's overall Gospel commends. Makes me think of Melancthon's drumbeat in Apology IV of the Lutheran Confessions: “It is not enough to preach the law . . . it is necessary to add the Gospel promise.” [Again] “The preaching of the law is not enough . . . the preaching of the Gospel must be added.” [Again] “Over and over again we say that the Gospel of

Christ must be added to the preaching of the law.”

That might lead one to conclude: So why bother preaching law at all? Here’s why: If the patient is convinced he’s not sick, he won’t take any medicine. Law-preaching in Reformation pastoral praxis is not fire-and-brimstone. Rather it is careful diagnosis of the patient’s de facto malady, taking your signals from a Biblical text to get to the bottom, to the God-problem, at the root of it all. There, and only there, is the promise of the crucified and risen One the therapy, the healing, that works. With shallow diagnosis, this depth-remedy is useless. With accurate depth diagnosis, but some other remedy applied, the patient stays stricken, “stripped, beaten, left half dead.”

Fred Danker likes to tweak folks by telling them “There is no New Testament Greek verb for ‘preach.’” When translations use the word “preach,” they are trying to cope with the sticky wicket that in NT Greek the writers take the two major “good news” NOUNS—euaggelion and kerygma, the gospel and the message—and simply make VERBS out of them. They never say “preach the Gospel,” or “preach the message.” Instead they say: “gospel-ize” and “message-ize.” To wit: “Do gospel; Do the message.” So strictly speaking there never is a question for the pastor: “What should I preach about this Sunday?” When you’re in the pulpit as Jesus’ rep, the assignment is always: Do gospel. Do the message.

[Ditto is true about the law. Never does the NT talk about “preaching” God’s law. And that’s not only because there is no Greek word for “preach.” Major reason is that God’s law is operative even if no one ever talks about it—or even if no one notices it constantly in operation. Like the air we breathe, it’s always there, even though most of the time we never even think about it. Better verbs for articulating God’s law would be “identify” where it’s already operating in people’s lives, “turn

the light on” to see what’s going on—what ALL is going on—in the room of daily life “under the law.” Flipping that light switch brings a double illumination, both of the law’s beneficial work in sustaining the world and us in it, as well as its critical operation in evaluating our life – day in and day out.

And THEREFORE our need—in the face of the law’s unrelenting drumbeat—our dire need, to be gospel-ized, message-ized! For the Gospel is not omni-present as God’s law is. It shows up only when someone DOES it, when someone brings another SOMEONE, the crucified and now risen Christ, into that room where the light switch was turned on. But when the verbs, gospel-ize and message-ize, are not happening, the nouns themselves aren’t present either. Romans 10:14-17 is the classic text for this.]

Not too long ago Timothy Hoyer, ELCA pastor in upstate New York, sent me some reflections on his work for the Doctor of Ministry degree at an ELCA seminary. It was all about proclaiming the Gospel. It was not cheering. It signaled the “hard times” nowadays when it comes to “euaggelion-izing” and “kerygma-izing.” Even the teachers of the preachers need help when it comes to the genuine gospel, the kosher kerygma. For in the law-lit rooms where we live “other” gospels abound. Granted, they are regularly legalized gospels, wolves in sheep’s clothing. Come to think of it, the NT apostles themselves report their constant encounter with “other” gospels. Conclusion: the apostolic age continues. Proclaiming THE Gospel in the marketplace of other gospels is the way it always is. Even during Timothy’s doctoral program. So he says. Read on.

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Ed Schroeder

Getting my D.Min. degree with accent on preaching

Jesus died and rose from the dead. People answer, "Sure, but what does that mean? Actually, what does that mean for me?" Those who tell others of Jesus need to continually figure out how to speak of Jesus in a way that works faith in people in the midst of the many things they cling to for hope and meaning. Clinging to such things is their way of making life work.

Everybody has a way to describe how life works for them. "Life sucks." "Just do it." "Family means everything to me." A bumper sticker reads, "Work. Buy. Consume. Die."

Each of those mottos gives people a way to understand why they do things or why things (bad things) happen. Such a way gives meaning to what happens, or an explanation of what happens. We need to have meaning. For some reason, the teenage answer to why they did something, "No reason," drives us crazy. Perhaps not having a reason is chaos. Then God spoke the law, which is the reason for why things are done, or the yardstick against which we measure how much and how well we have done. Then there is meaning.

That is the only meaning we have and is in all religions, and in all "isms" (hedonism, capitalism, racism, etc.).

So at X Seminary of the ELCA, in the first class of my Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching, the professor taught, "History is a different time than what we have in the now. No way to get back to past events. We regularly attach meaning to events. 'What did you do last night or at school?' You answer, 'Nothing.' Nothing means nothing significant, nothing of meaning. Different people attach different meanings to what they did. Eventually there is no certain way to decide what is important. No proof. Therefore, we can only assert or confess.

When we communicate our confessions, we need a medium – a play, a movie, opera, a musical. The medium is a way to point to the meaning. Jesus is the event. Gospel is the meaning, that is, confessing who Jesus was and did. Scripture is the medium.”

The Gospel, as confessed by the professor, is that Jesus is the most clear way God speaks to us and the clearest way to read Scripture. Jesus is the interpretive key. Why? His death and resurrection are the key. Why? Because, in the example of Matthew’s Gospel, it is a story with a long introduction. The plot movement is to the cross and resurrection. The movement is from death to life. When God encounters us, the pattern of events is that we realize we are not God and are vulnerable. That makes us feel out of control. To be out of control is death-like. To realize that God knows us as we really are is to die, to give up independence. But then we move from death to life. It is Jesus who died for us. Jesus loves us as we are. He invites us to come into life.

Compared to the Crossings’ Diagnosis/Prognosis, faith is implied but not emphasized; and there is no God-problem because it’s only the not being in control that is “death-like,” which is not the same as God demanding the death of those who don’t trust God. Note the difference between not trusting God and being unaware that one is not in control. Jesus is described as the clearest way God speaks to us, as if God wasn’t precise enough in God’s words for us to understand. Jesus is not heard as a new and good and different message, a message of promise instead of just a clearer word of law. But maybe not law, for the invitation into life, according to the professor, is not about an invitation into trusting God through Jesus, but to have a better life, to have hope instead of despair, health instead of sickness, wealth instead of poverty, friends instead of loneliness. Thus, it was not about having Jesus instead of law, mercy instead of condemnation, life with God instead of

death, living by faith in Christ instead of living by one's own efforts to get things done.

That limited Gospel did not continue to get used. It was mentioned and forgotten (maybe because it was not that enticing, not more meaningful than other meanings we attach to ourselves and events). When sermons were presented in class, two per person, there never was critique about how that limited Gospel was used, no discussion about how effective was the attachment of the limited Gospel to people and the events of their lives.

If not even that limited Gospel is used to give meaning, then some "other gospel" is used, and that other gospel is always law, always conditional, always based on what we do.

Not only did my class not use Jesus, when we heard the sermons of the people in the classes ahead of us, Jesus was not used, his death and rising were never used as the basis for our new relationship with God.

Another class was led by a professor who teaches the four-page sermon. Page one tells what trouble people in the text are having. Page two is how we are having comparable trouble. Page Three is about what grace is happening in the text. Page four is to give the hearers the same grace. To figure out what grace is happening in the text for page three and four, the question asked is, "What is God doing in the text?" The assumption was that God only does grace. As in the first class, there was no God-problem. And since the text does not contain Jesus' death and rising, the grace in the sermons was not based on Jesus and his death and rising. Also, there was the assumption that we do love God and we just need to be assured in hard times that God loves us. Which is not the same as we "are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God."

So, there was a poor diagnosis, there was a limited Gospel, and no follow-through, no asking, "How was Jesus used?" Jesus as the key to Scripture was not emphasized.

There were classes on preaching Revelation, preaching the psalms, preaching the prophets, preaching Acts, and preaching the parables of Jesus. None of those professors talked of how to better use the death and rising of Jesus in sermons based on Revelation or the prophets or the parables of Jesus. One professor said that there is gospel in the Old Testament, in that God frees us from slavery, or that God makes us God's people and we are to have no other gods, or "The Lord your God is a great God." After hearing sermons from the class, none asked, "How was Jesus used?" There were only comments on clever stories, good images, how the text was used, and comments on public speaking skills.

When one student insisted on using the death and rising of Jesus he only got the response of, "Oh, there he goes again." That is a dismissal of what was said as not important. For a student to insist on connecting Jesus' death and rising to people through a sermon does not work in a law-based academic setting because the professor, the guest expert, is given all credence as the one to listen to, not some mild-mannered Clark Kent kind of guy.

It seems foolish to attach Jesus' death and rising to us and to what happens each day in our lives. But God has attached Jesus' death to us, to all we do, and to all that happens. This we know because God raised Jesus from the dead. The goodness of what God does for us through Jesus is that we are forgiven instead of having our unfaith counted against us. We are given life again after death instead of just nothing. We are declared good before God for Jesus' sake instead of having to earn our goodness before God, a goodness we cannot earn. We are given

the Holy Spirit to be our strength, our hope, and our heart of Christ's love, the new way to relate to one another instead of loving others as we love ourselves. When anything else is used to make life better or to give it meaning or to establish a relationship with God, then Jesus is not used and he died for nothing. God does not think Jesus is nothing. God has raised Jesus from the dead.

Timothy Hoyer

P.S. from ES. In this week's e-exchange about this posting I learned this from Timothy: I have confirmation camp next week. The curriculum is given to us, as if that is a favor in that we don't have to plan anything. Just do what is written for you. Alas, it's all "God does this and God uses you and Jesus expects you to . . . " So I get to "gospel-ize" the curriculum.