

Self-Reflections for Ash Wednesday

Colleagues,

Recent ThTh postings on Lutheran Missiology have elicited a number of long and thoughtful responses. A couple of you have gone the extra mile and given me two pieces to think about. It'll take time for me to work my way through all of them—and I want to do that.

So today's ThTh #143 shifts gears to two items harvested from publications that came my way last week as Ash Wednesday arrived. The first one appeared in the parish newsletter—Lent 2001—of St. John Lutheran Church, Westville, New Jersey. Its author is St. John's pastor, Beth Orling. The second appeared in EPISCOPAL LIFE/DIOCESAN LIFE (March 2001). Its author is Paul Marshall, bishop of the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, diocese of the Episcopal Church USA.

Both Paul and Beth are dear friends of our family from ancient days. Each piece comes to you with the author's consent.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

On Feb. 26, the County of Gloucester granted me the use of my birth and Baptism name: Elizabeth Ann Orling. You have been seeing the "Orling" part on our publications. You and I may both get confused for a while. Good that "Pastor" as a name doesn't change. And you may call me just about anything, just not late for the soup suppers.

I will be happy to have my old name back. It will be listed eventually in the ELCA register of pastors next to my cousin Robert Orling, who served many years as an army chaplain (Vietnam). In the book of life, I will fall in under John (Johann) Orling, my grandfather who rode through New England and the Midwest on horseback as a lay preacher in his early years. Then there is Eric Orling, my dad, whose days of learning the German catechism were forgotten, but who never forgot the importance of Christian education. My brother Jim Orling and sister Teena Orling sing in their church choirs. Nieces Emily and Madeline Orling are the next generation – along with my kids who carry their dad's name, and accompanied by "Orling" women whose birth names are put aside but not lost by marriage.

There is, however, really nothing in a name that allows special pride. Rather, each of us can boast of our connection with Christ, a connection promised when we were baptized and were given the name "Child of God" which never changes.

But we treasure our names anyway! It is somewhat traumatic to change them – perhaps even more so when removing a wedding ring instead of adding one. Having my divorce come the same week as Ash Wednesday adds a sadness to the already somber Lenten season. "Remember, Beth, that you – and your marriage – are dust." These are strong words – words of judgment and of stark reality. However, even as we put ashes on our foreheads, the church makes plans for ordering Easter bulletins and lilies! Beyond the brokenness of our lives, Jesus stands at the empty tomb, inviting us to live life abundantly, promising us his forgiving presence all our days, and encouraging us in our struggles.

This is the name which is above every name: at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . in heaven, . . . on earth. And we are privileged to carry the name Christian, Child of God. We

received it at our Baptisms and no one can change it. It's ours for all time and for eternity. Thanks be to God! As Lent continues, let us cherish the name we share and carry it with humility and inner joy. Even more, let us cherish and glorify the giver of the name: Christ our Lord.

Blessings to you,
Pastor

ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE

[the bishop's regular column in the monthly diocesan newspaper]

The old prayer book prayed that God would "prevent us in all our doings." Now we pray that God's grace would go before and follow us. As Lent comes, these words are on my mind, because I have nowhere else to turn if I take the season seriously. If this is a time to be serious about sin in our lives, grace needs to be the framework. That is because in one sense, there is no such thing as a clean slate.

You see, I had hoped that there would be a seamless transition from the cocksureness of youth to the quiet wisdom of age. I seem to find myself much too old to be cocksure and too young to be quietly and calmly wise. What seems to lie between the two, if the latter is in the cards at all, is a wide desert of stocktaking and reflection, and I keep walking into cactus.

It is shocking to find that things I was proud of twenty years ago I now recognize as sins of arrogance or cowardice; other things that seemed good at the time now appear to have been expressions of gross stupidity, inexperience, or just not getting it. It is painful, of course, to have this feeling about similar mistakes made last week. It is much worse to discover

that important parts of my story, memories I may have cherished, were blunders.

Many of my sins are in a sense well-intentioned. Trying to change people I care about is one of my biggest pitfalls, and I suspect I am not the only spouse, parent, or leader who has this weakness from time to time. In my actions and those of others, I have learned that when micro-management is taking place, the devil is not far away. If it sounds like nagging or control-seeking, it probably isn't love.

No doubt, ten years from now, I will have a different perspective on aspects of my present life and behavior, and perhaps even discover that I made some lucky guesses along with the occasional anxious caving in to the lower nature.

Nonetheless, there still is no such thing as a clean slate in the sense of ever thoroughly knowing ourselves and repenting of all our sins. That is why in some traditions we confess all those sins we "cannot now remember."

This inability to know ourselves accurately is a thought expressed over and over in the Psalms. It means that we do not think of our lives as "pretty good," with the balance covered by God's grace. The truth is rather that we rest in God's grace, period. The slate is clean only because God has called it clean in Jesus Christ. If this were not true, nobody would have the courage to take any risks.

The reality of that observation caught me when I was rethinking those items of twenty years ago, and realized that some things that I had considered steps forward actually harmed some people. Even those things we may perceive as our good works need the umbrella of grace. Again, if we could not depend on God's grace to go before and follow after us, who would dare to try anything at all new?

Again, I share these somber thoughts as encouragement to go more deeply into the Lenten journey. Uncomfortable as self-examination sometimes is, there is nothing to fear: even our good deeds are covered by God's grace in Jesus Christ. We sometimes fear to look closely at certain episodes in our lives because we do not think we can stand the pain of seeing how wrong we have been or how much we have complicated other people's lives. The truth is that once we see things and name them for what they are, the worst is over, and we can hear again those words Jesus spoke, "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned."

Have you ever been in a situation where the last thing you were going to do was admit you were wrong, even about something trivial? As we increasingly understand how much God loves us at our worst, we have increasingly less to defend or deny – more freedom to admit that we are wrong and to get about the business of opening our hearts to change.

This newspaper should arrive in your mail very close to Ash Wednesday. I hope that each of us receives the Lenten call to self-examination and repentance not as a bore or burden, but as an opportunity to enter more fully into the life God wants to give us. Knowing that Christ is with us in mercy and grace gives us the courage to face ourselves and let God lead us to new maturity.

Bishop Paul V. Marshall