

Walter R. Bouman's Sermon: "The Foolishness of the Gospel is our Wisdom"

Colleagues,

Walt Bouman and I were seminary classmates in St. Louis 55 years ago. Our lives have been linked ever since. E.g., he nudged Marie and me into meeting each other. [You've both got the same sense of humor, he said. You "deserve" each other.] After seminary it was grad school for both of us in Germany (he on his Fullbright in Heidelberg, I petticoating on Marie's Fullbright in Hamburg) along with student high jinks thereunto appertaining. Example: a 1956 Bouman-organized summer holiday adventure with 3 other St. Louis grads studying in Germany, that took us to the Taize community, Ronchamps, Gruenewald's Isenheim Altar, Strassburg, Salzburg, climbing an Alp or two in Switzerland (even a walk "inside" the Rhone glacier), Mad King Ludwig's Bavarian castles, Passau to pick up a harpsichord—yes!—that Walt had bought, which then we finessed it into our VW Microbus along with the 6 of us Missouri-Synners! The last gasp was winding up at the Bayreuth Festival for all four operas of Wagner's Ring. Ah, frivolous youth. But we did finally get our degrees. During the Wars of Missouri in the seventies we were co-confessors on the ramparts, and have been tweaking each other through all these years for the best way to articulate a Catholicism of the Augsburg Confession, wherein we probably carry on the debate of our major mentors from those ancient days in Germany—Walt with Edmund Schlink and I with Werner Elert.

Two months ago Walt's far-advanced cancer was discovered during a surgery. He has opted for no therapeutic intervention. He crosses that cancer with the Gospel in his sermon below,

preached 2 weeks ago at the chapel of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus Ohio, his workplace for decades. Trinity has a consortium connection with Bexley Hall, an Episcopalian seminary located on the same campus. On the day that Walt preached it was Bexley Hall's turn. The liturgy was "in the Anglican tradition."

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

May 18, 2005

The Holy Eucharist

My thanks to Bexley Hall for the invitation to preach today. It is appropriate because my [Episcopal] colleague Bill Petersen and I worked together on Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue III and there first dreamed of a relationship between Bexley Hall and Trinity Seminary. My thanks to all of you for your prayers and greetings, your visits and your care, your love and support. I am sustained by the Gospel and the Eucharist.

(An aside: My pastor, Al Debelak, came to share communion in the hospital. He had the prayers and a lesson, and the great thanksgiving. My roommate had a large, noisy, extended family. And when the first of his family visitors arrived, he said: "Do you know what? They had a mass at the next bed! Isn't that right?" he asked me. I said, "Yes." Then he said, "What are you?" I replied, "A Lutheran." "What are Lutherans?" he asked. "Reformed Catholics," I said. And then as each new family member arrived, he repeated, "They had a mass at the next bed. My roommate is a Lutheran, and they're Reformed Catholics!")

Jan and I are also sustained by the seminary community in its

broadest sense. Thank you.

Of course I have turned to some of my favorite jokes about death. Woody Allen: "It is impossible to experience your own death objectively and still carry a tune." "Some things are worse than death. Have you ever spent two hours with an insurance salesman?" Johnny Carson is my favorite so far: "It is true that for several days after you die, your hair and fingernails keep on growing, but the phone calls taper off."

I first thought of preaching on that important holy day this week, Syttende Mai. [= May 17, Norwegian Independence Day (from Sweden) in 1905] This is also the week of Pentecost, and then we are anticipating the dreaded Trinity Sunday. Before I discovered that the Trinity is the story we tell of God because of the gospel, I thought that I was preaching the incomprehensible to the uncomprehending. But today I want to direct our attention to another word from Scripture, some verses from Psalm 90. The days of our life are seventy years, and perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. ... So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Psalm 90, vs. 10 and 12.

I'm counting. I'm counting. It took a blow to the head with a two-by-four to get my attention. But I'm counting. The oncologist told me I have six to nine months. When do I start counting, I asked him, April 1 or May 1? That's a quibble, he replied. So I haven't exactly begun a countdown. You know, 180 minus 1 and counting. But I am aware that each day is a gift, to be treasured and savored. I am listening to the classical music on WOSU-FM a lot these days. Just listening. Hearing new music, and new things in familiar music. I have been thinking that I could happily spend a lot of eternity just listening to music. Bach, above all.

When I first returned home from the hospital I prayed each night that God would not let me wake up in this world. But then Anna Madsen sent me an e-mail saying, "Don't you dare die until I get to Columbus." When Anna talks, even God listens. So I stopped praying the prayer. Instead I have turned to a prayer that I first prayed in German as a child. "Breit aus die Flügel beide, O Jesu meine Freude, und nimm dein Küchlein ein." My own rough translation is

"Spread out both of your wings, Oh Jesus, my Joy, and gather in your little cupcake."

Hard now to think of myself as a "little cupcake," so I pray the English translation instead:

Lord Jesus, who does love me,
Oh spread thy wings above me,
And shield me from alarm.
Though evil would assail me
Thy mercy will not fail me.
I rest in thy protecting arm.

But I'm counting.

The purpose for the counting is not like sitting on death row. It is to gain a wise heart, or in an older translation, that "we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." I have been thinking much about what wisdom I have gained, what is of such importance that it must be shared with you today. I have come up with four essentials. I tried to make it a Lutheran three, but these four seemed irreducible.

I. The first is God's own foolishness, which is wiser than our wisdom. Who could have imagined that Jesus, the crucified Jew, is the Messiah of Israel and the world. He

is identified as Messiah by his resurrection from the dead. The gospel is not an idea, for example, that God loves us, although that is true. The gospel is good news, it is the announcement that something good and absolutely decisive for the universe has happened. The Christian good news is simply: Jesus is risen! That is good news because it means that death no longer has power over him. Jesus, not death, will have the last word. But the resurrection of Jesus was not personal vindication. He has become the first fruits of all that sleep. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. He will reign until he has put all things under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. And then God will be everything in everyone. (I Cor. 15:22-28)

Note that this is a vision for the future and it beckons us to follow it. Of course Jesus is also about the past, our past, the world's past. There on the cross he takes sin and evil and death into God's own being and history, where it is overcome forever. But the gospel is first and foremost a vision for the future. Because Jesus is risen, everything has changed radically. We are set free from serving the powers of death with our lives, our fears, our policies. We are set free from having to protect ourselves at whatever cost to others. We are set free from the dreadful necessity to grab all the gusto we can because we only go around once. We are set free from the compulsion to cling to every day and hour of life in this world.

Note also that this vision applies to everyone. Paul says "all" repeatedly, and I take it that he means "all." Robert Farrar Capon taught me some years ago that Jesus did not come to repair the repairable, correct the correctable, improve the improvable. He came to raise the

dead! The only final condition for eternal participation in Christ's victory is that we be dead, 100% gold-plated dead! Paul exults in God's universal forgiveness. "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." (Romans 11:32) It is God's unconditional love that evokes his outburst of praise: "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways." (Romans 11:33)

We really have trouble getting it. Ann Lamott quotes the pastor of "The Church of 80% Sincerity:" We are capable of unconditional love, but it has a shelf life of about 8 to 10 seconds. "We might say to our beloved, 'Darling, I'll love you unconditionally until the very end of dinner.'" It is God's eternal unconditional love that distinguishes God from us (Hosea 11:8-9), and not God's infinity or presumed immortality. Difficult as it is (because I always think of it as unfair), I have come to accept God's universal salvation as the final consequence of the resurrection of Jesus. I think of all: the best and worst, the innocent and the guilty, the victims of the holocaust and the evil perpetrators, those killed in all of our senseless wars, and the misguided leaders who send them into battle. Christ will raise us all, and somehow bend us into shape so that in eternity we become the human beings we were intended to be.

II. Because Christ is risen, because the messianic age has come, Christ's messianic people are identified by our participation in the messianic banquet. Nothing has changed so much in my lifetime as the church's understanding of the Eucharist. In my youth the Eucharist was a penitential ritual, associated with repentance and forgiveness, with confession and absolution. Of course,

we are set free to repent by God's unsearchable forgiveness. But as we have begun to recover our roots in Judaism, we have discovered that because the messianic age is here, we are already at the messiah's feast (Isaiah 25:6-9). This is the feast of victory for our God. Well, it is only hors d'oeuvres on this side of the grave, but it is already a foretaste of the feast to come. This is what identifies us as Messiah's people. When I graduated from seminary 51 years ago, I don't think there were 100 Lutheran parishes that had weekly Eucharist. Now there are many thousands, and the number grows apace.

So, in Gordon Lathrop's wonderful insight, you are ordained to be table waiters. That is what it means to serve. Ordained ministry is not about meeting people's needs, although that is a dimension of the whole church's ministry to the Reign of God. Still less is it about accommodating people's bondage to the powers of death so that we can keep our jobs. Ordained ministry is quite simply that we wait on table, where Christ is already embracing us with his victory, and eating and drinking new with us in the Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

The Eucharist also gives us our mission. For what is present to us in this meal is nothing less than Christ's offering of himself for the world. In the meal he takes us up into his offering and makes us his body for the world. In the Eucharist we experience that there is more to do with our lives than to protect them. We are set free to offer them. We pray: "We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us: ourselves, our time, and our possessions." Only Christ can make such a total claim upon us, and only Christ can set us free for such a total offering. So we are free to gather as the

church made visible at the table and then free to be sent as the church scattered in total service to the reign of God.

III. *Because Christ is risen, we are free to love the church.* I don't mean the church that gives us warm fuzzies, that embraces us with comfort and love. I mean the real church, the church that fills us with dismay, that robs us of hope, that pursues agendas so contrary to the mind of Christ that we want to despair. That's the church we are free to love. The church that elects a pope who seems unwilling to address the urgent issues facing church and world. The church in Kansas that seems determined to pit Genesis against evolution instead of recognizing that a literalistic interpretation of Genesis has little to do with the origins and meanings of the traditions in Genesis and the place of creation theology in the proclamation of the gospel. The church that is the ELCA threatening to tear itself apart over the issue of blessing same-sex unions, an issue that is not the gospel which constitutes and unites the church. That is the church which Jesus' resurrection frees you to love.

You are free to imprint on your hearts and minds the great apostolic words from Ephesians 4: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, putting up with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In the last chapter of Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the disciple community to await being "clothed with power from on high." We do not need to be "clothed with power from on high" to join a bridge club, root for the Buckeyes, golf with our friends, or champion causes with other like-

minded people.

But we need “power from on high” to be the church, that is, to be so grasped by Christ that we can “put up with each other” in “a community that can sustain its unity in the midst of disagreement over emotionally charged issues, without demonizing or disregarding, excluding or humiliating each other.” (Faithful Conversation, Daniel Olson, page 102) Olson points out that our present situation gives the church a magnificent opportunity to be the church – to disagree profoundly over truly important matters without turning away from each other or turning against each other.

IV. The resurrection of Jesus frees us to love the world. I think of that great cosmic and mysterious universe set in motion by the creative urge of the Father, called into being through the creating Logos, given a life which is pointed toward a new heaven and a new earth by the aspiring Holy Spirit. But we are free to love a more manageable world, our own small planet placed into our care as stewards of God’s gift. Such love of our world was never more in need. I have noticed two insistent temptations in my illness. The first is an almost narcissistic fixation on myself and my body, noting every twinge and change, keeping my plumbing working, measuring what and how much I can eat. The second is an irrational twist on “Stop the world, I want to get off.” My cry, when I hear of plans for travel I will no longer be able to undertake, futures of which I will not be a part, is to shout, “Stop the world because I’m getting off.” What rescues me from both of these temptations is, in part, my longtime habit of watching the daily news, reading the daily paper, working my way through two news magazines, and keeping up with the affairs of the church

and the world.

A lot of what I read is appalling in terms of our care for this planet. Time magazine had a cover story on Ann Coulter a few weeks ago. In the article she was quoted as saying: "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the seas. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" To which Peter Fenn, her Democratic counterpart on a Fox news broadcast responded: "We're Americans, so we should consume as much of the earth's resources as fast as we possibly can." To which Coulter replied, "Yes. Yes! As opposed to living like the Indians." Time, March 25, 2005, page 37) Coulter gets \$25,000 a speech for throwing this "red meat" to her right-wing audiences. No politician would dare to say such things, but the audiences love it. What we must do is look at the policies proposed and imposed by law and decree, the lack of concern for pollution and our consumption of fossil fuels. The World-watch Institute publishes an annual "State of the World" report. The goal of the World-watch Institute is for our generation to hand on to future generations a world undiminished in its capacity to sustain life.

We are not on the verge of Armageddon. We are not waiting for Christ to rapture us out of the world so that we can have a ring-side seat as the world is destroyed. We are called to be stewards, to hand on a world as we received it from our parents and grandparents.

We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves into the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice especially where our institutions and our country are

guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But you are set free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won.

So we come back to the beginning. My capacity for being a steward is limited and moving towards its end. Your capacity is still vibrant and active. But God continues to call all of us, even me counting my days, to be grasped by the great good news that Jesus is risen, to be taken up into Christ's offering in the meal, to be the church by putting up with each other in love, and to care for our world.

I am being readied for my final baptism, my last dying and rising with Christ. All my baptisms of dying and rising with Christ, from July 28, 1929 to the present moment, have prepared me for this time. I turn often to the hymn-prayer with which J.S. Bach concludes his magnificent Passion According to St. John. It is the final stanza of a hymn by Martin Schalling (1532-1608), No. 325 in the Lutheran Book of Worship. I ask you to join me in praying/singing that final stanza.

*Lord, let at last thine angels come,
To Abr'hams bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in quiet sleep
Until thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me,
That these mine eyes with joy may see,
O Son of God, thy glorious face,
My Savior and my fount of grace.
Lord Jesus Christ,
My prayer attend, my prayer attend,
And I will praise thee without end.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Walter R. Bouman

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