

#794 More Ways Than One to Preach a Text

Colleagues,

I shouldn't be surprised if today's topic strikes lots of you as odd, not to say silly. Statements of the obvious tend to have that effect on readers, and it's hard to imagine anything more obvious than an observation that any one text will yield many sermons. Has there ever been a seminarian who failed to discover this in the first week of his first course in preaching?

Then again, we human beings have a thing for patterns, grooves, ruts, and other devices that help us deal with the challenge of excessive possibility, and preachers are as prone to these as anyone. One way of coping with the heap of choices that any text presents is to bring a predetermined set of theological expectations to it, or require it to service a particular rhetorical pattern, or insist that it support some larger thematic objective that the preacher has in mind. I do this myself as a matter of course. So does every other preacher I've ever listened to over any length of time. So does every school of preaching, and every theological tradition. What is Crossings if not an ongoing argument for a patterned approach to the reading of texts?

As with everything, of course, patterns have their downside. If they discipline the eye to catch essentials, they also keep the eye from spotting useful ideas and approaches that might otherwise be noticed. Comes the day for every preacher, I suppose, when he or she is pretty much rehearsing familiar themes and ignoring any number of gems embedded in the preaching text that could well be lifted up to the glory of God and the praise of Christ.

At the end of last month we sent you a remarkable first sermon on the Good Samaritan text by Candice Stone, a seminary intern ([ThTheol #789](#)). We passed it along in part because we saw Candice replicating the interpretive pattern we're familiar with at Crossings. This emerged particularly in the way she associated her hearers with the characters in the story, locating them quickly with the fellow lying in the ditch and going nowhere unless a Samaritan named Christ should happen by to rescue them.

Today we send you another sermon on the same text ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). It was preached on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, on that same day that Candice preached hers in University City, Missouri. The preacher in this case was the Rev. Richard Hoyer. Pr. Hoyer, a classmate and brother-in-law of Ed Schroeder, is retired from full-time ministry but continues, obviously, to supply pulpits as retired pastors do. He also follows Thursday Theology, and on reading Candice's effort was moved to send his along "in the hope that it too might provide wings for the Spirit." Indeed it does, we think. We also think that you'll be struck as we were by the marked difference in approach that Pr. Hoyer takes as he reads his audience, assesses the effect the text is having on them, and works out how to respond to that. Just as striking is the way he reaches for Gospel not so much from the text itself as from its companion passage, the appointed Epistle for the day, [Colossians 1:1-14](#). I didn't ask him, but I'll bet such a move is an aspect of his preaching pattern, which shows up also in the way he organizes the sermon under clear sub-headings. It's an older pattern than the one I use, and it's much older than Candice's. And it manages, I think, to deliver Gospel goods that neither of us would get around to. Enjoy them.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Richard O. Hoyer

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 10:25-37

"Tired of the Good Samaritan?"

People of God, sisters and brothers,

I. SICK OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

- A. 'CAUSE WE'RE SICK OF OURSELVES Ah, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Again. We get to hear this story only once every three years, but the Samaritan is in our face a lot more frequently than that, and, frankly, I'm tired of him. I suspect you are, too.

Everybody knows about the Good Samaritan. He's become a part of our culture. "Be a good Samaritan," people keep telling us, that is to say, "Help people in need, even if it's out of your way, and at whatever cost or risk to yourself." Yeah, well, that's easy to say but a whole lot harder to do. One wonders if those who admonish us to be Good Samaritans are such themselves. Besides that, Good Samaritans often get hurt. People take advantage of them, think they're fools. On the other hand, because it is so hard to be a Good Samaritan, the story is often watered down until it's little more than the gooey admonition, "Be nice!" I'm getting tired of hearing about him.

Well, don't get me wrong. The Good Samaritan is indeed good as are those who emulate him. Power to them! What makes me sick and tired of the Good Samaritan is that, in comparison to him, I'm at best a mediocre Samaritan. What's worse is that I'm afraid I don't really want to be a Good Samaritan. Underneath my pious façade I'm afraid I subconsciously expect people to be independent, to take

care of themselves and not be a burden on society and increase my taxes. If people are hurting, well, let them suck it up and get back on their own two feet. So, if that's how I'm feeling down in my heart, then even when I'm being a mediocre Samaritan it's mostly fake. Artificial. That's why I'm sick of the Good Samaritan.

The truth is, we're really not all that good at all, are we? We are by nature a part of this human race that is not very nice. Look at what people are doing to each other these days in Syria. In Egypt. Iraq. Afghanistan. On and on. Look at what people have done in the past and are still doing: slavery, genocide, wars, religious persecutions, prejudice, intolerance, even little children bullying unmercifully. It's all so awful! And we're a part of the human race that does such things. We're as bad as any of those bad guys, or very possibly would be if we were in their shoes.

Remember what St. Paul called all this in our Second Lesson this morning? "The power of darkness." The power of darkness. We know what he means, don't we? This "human stain," as the novelist Philip Roth calls it, *is* rank and ugly, and it's a power so strong that it can overwhelm us if we let down our guard even a little. Maybe sometimes we can act a little bit like the Good Samaritan, but inside?

That's why we're sick of the Good Samaritan; it's because we're sick of ourselves.

B. AND SICK OF OUR FAILURES I think that lawyer who came to Jesus with the question that prompted this parable was pretty sick of himself too, however deep he'd pushed it down. But give him credit! Most people simply shrug their shoulders and say, "What do you expect? I'm only human."

They don't seem to realize that this human captivity to the "power of darkness" is the problem, not an excuse. We're not supposed to be this way, or act this way. We don't *have* to act this way, we choose to. And whatever it is inside us that does the choosing is obviously inclined to choose the evil. The "power of darkness."

Nor would most people recognize that this bondage to darkness is serious because we have a Creator who judges us. We are accountable to God for what we are and do in this darkness.

You know that, don't you? Surely you do, or you wouldn't be here. Well, that lawyer knew it, too. He knew he had a Judge. That's why he sought Jesus out and asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I suspect that underneath that question was the very real pain of living in captivity to the "power of darkness." He's not merely asking, "How can I get to heaven, someday, maybe, if there really is a heaven?" No, he's asking, "How can I be right with this God who judges me for what I do in this darkness? How can I escape the wrath I know I deserve?"

You ask that question too, don't you? Even if you've never said it out loud, deep down inside you're asking it. If not, you should be!

The answer Jesus gives doesn't seem to help much at all, at least not at first. "What is written in the law?" Jesus asks the lawyer. (We would have said, "What does the Bible say?" Same thing.) The lawyer replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Look at that! The guy already knew the answer to his question. Jesus commends him: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

So, if he already knew the answer, why did he ask the question? His anguish is related to those two little words at the end, where Jesus said to him, "do this." Do this? When I hear those words I want to shout out my despair, "Do this? Don't you think I would if I could?"

And then, after telling the story about the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells the lawyer, "Go and do likewise." That's no different from what he told the lawyer in the first place, "Love God, love your neighbor; do this and you will live." My heart sinks when I hear that. I feel like *I'm* the one who's been beaten and thrown into the ditch and left there to die. I can't go and do likewise, God! I can't be a Good Samaritan!

You see? Knowledge is not power. That's what Jesus is trying to get the lawyer, and us, to realize. Just because I know what I should be and what I should be doing doesn't mean I have the power to do it. Just because I know what a Good Samaritan is doesn't mean I can be one.

Ah, but we try. It's significant that in our Lord's parable the two people who "passed by on the other side" of the wretch dying in the ditch were a priest and a Levite (Levites were lay people who assisted the priests). These were good people, godly people.

Like us. By virtue of our Baptism we're all priests, serving at God's altar (which is what we're doing here). We're trying to be good, trying to keep the commandments, trying to be pious and faithful. We're pretty good at it too, by and large. Good, godly people!

And yet Jesus condemns us for passing by on the other side. Jesus is telling that lawyer, and us, that being religious doesn't necessarily make us good if it stays

only on the outside. What matters is inside, what's in our heart. What matters is what we are. What makes the Good Samaritan good is not merely what he did but what he was, inside. He had compassion because he was compassionate.

Well, we know that too, don't we? And knowing that makes me sick of the Good Samaritan, because I'm sick of myself and sick of my failures.

II. BUT GOD IS MAKING US ONE

A. GOD TRANSFERS US So what are we to do? Sounds just like that lawyer, doesn't it? "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Captive to the power of darkness, unable to be the Good Samaritan we know we ought to be, what are we to do?

The hard truth is that there's nothing we can do. The Samaritan was Good not so much because of what he *did*, but because of what he *was*: he had *compassion* for the wretch dying in the ditch. He loved his neighbor. But you know as well as I do that you can't *will* love, can't make yourself love. Maybe I can *act* like a Good Samaritan, a little bit, now and then, but I can't make myself *be* a Good Samaritan, can't create on my own that compassion that makes the Good Samaritan good.

Ah, but God can. God can make us Good Samaritans!

Listen to St. Paul in our Second Lesson: "[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." What we can't do, God does. Though we be captive to the power of darkness, God has redeemed us, set us free! How? Paul says it: *by forgiving our sins*. God forgives us! You aren't a Good

Samaritan? That's terrible, but God forgives you. You don't do what you ought to do? Shame on you! But God forgives you. In the power of darkness, have you done all kinds of evil—are doing them still? You wretched sinner! But God forgives you.

Don't think it's easy! A holy God can't merely wave his hand and say, "Oh, forget it." How can the Holy One do that and still be holy? Forgiving us brought the God who is beyond the universe into humanity itself, into that very darkness that holds us in its power. Our forgiveness brought God to the cross. Who can comprehend that? Don't take your forgiveness lightly!

More than that, *let it work in you*. Not only has God rescued us from the power of darkness, he has also, as St. Paul says, "transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." He has taken us from the darkness and brought us to himself. To put it another way, God, through the forgiveness worked out on that cross, is working in us so that we don't merely *act* like Good Samaritans, more or less, but *become* Good Samaritans here, in our hearts

B. AND IS CHANGING US So, are you sick and tired of hearing about the Good Samaritan? Listen to the Gospel: you are forgiven! Though we still live in the darkness, we have been rescued from its power and transferred into the kingdom of God's dear Son, brought close to the heart of God himself. Don't be tired of the Good Samaritan. After all, God is making you one. Let him!

#793 Orts: 1. On rules. 2. Concerning the hidebound. 3. On missing the point. 4. A bit of beggin

Colleagues,

Orts. Now there's a word for you, the kind you might expect to stumble across in the Thursday or Friday crossword puzzle when the going gets tougher. That's assuming you live in or near a city that still features daily delivery of a newspaper to the door, which my current hometown, Cleveland, Ohio, no longer does. That's as of two weeks ago, when the *Plain Dealer* laid off another batch of long-time employees and launched a risky experiment in digital publishing. "Get your paper delivered by email on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday; how delighted you will be"—thus the PD pooh-bahs. God for his part hears what the pooh-bahs don't—doesn't he always?—and I should be very much surprised if the Lord's ears aren't being assaulted in recent days by the sound of grinding dentures rising up in stricken complaint from people my age and older throughout northeastern Ohio. We miss our paper; our chance, come Thursday, to remember yet again that the three-letter word that means "scrap; leftover" is—yes—"ort."

Orts comprise this week's belated post—the best we can do for this week when the cupboard is rather bare and your fearless editors are up to their ears in other work. May today's scraps tantalize, at least. Better still if one or more should provoke one or more of you to send along a more nourishing contribution for us to pass around to the readership in the near future.

Scrap 1: When a rule broken is a rule kept. A quick take on Sunday's Gospel.

That's "Sunday," as in Sunday, Aug. 25. The Fourteenth after Pentecost (2013), Proper 16, Series C, in the [Revised Common Lectionary](#). Since you're getting this several days late, the preachers among you will want to file this note for next time the pericope rolls around, in A.D. 2016. Doubtless you'll have already perused the canny [Sabbatheology analysis](#) of the Gospel text, Luke 13:10-17, by Tim Hoyer. Add to it a pithy observation by the Rev. David Daley, a newly retired pastor of the Christian Reformed Church who keeps me and some other Lutheran clerics on our toes with his unfailingly solid work at our tri-weekly pericope study. The text opens, you'll recall, with Jesus healing a crippled woman in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Then it segues into his rebuke of the synagogue's head honcho and other carping opponents. David's note: when Jesus heals the woman, she and she alone starts praising God (v. 13). When he stuffs it down the throats of the legalists, the entire crowd goes nuts and praises God (v. 17). "Now there's a crowd that appreciates a miracle when it sees one," chuckles David.

My add-on comment: the crowds are still milling today, still waiting and watching for a scrap of genuine relief from the preachers they're obliged to listen to. Presumably those preachers recognize that a synonym for "relief" is "Sabbath rest." Isn't that exactly what Jesus winds up giving the crowd? When will today's preachers finally notice how the irony at this point is off-the-charts delicious, the rules being kept by dint of losing the rules? What will it take to get rule-bound types like most of us not only savoring the irony, but putting it to use on Christ's authority, for the sake of the crowds he still aims to relieve? *Veni, Creator Spiritus*.

Scrap 2: On the fate of the hidebound.

I was struck by Columnist [Joe Nocera's reflection in last Tuesday's New York Times](#) about the unfolding similarity in fates between the once ubiquitous Wang word-processor and the recently ubiquitous BlackBerry. Does anybody remember the Wang? It was the hottest, latest, must-have piece of office equipment in days when I was still pounding things out on a manual Olympia typewriter. I recall seeing one at incessant work in the fund-raising office of a school I worked at briefly after seminary. I drooled over it as over a new stick-shift BMW or any other item one craves but will never afford. A few years later I got my first PC. I promptly forgot that the Wang ever was until Nocera brought it up. I'll bet my iPhone-addicted children soon forget that they ever owned BlackBerries.

Nocera uses his column to explore why this happened. A few highlights:

"[An Wang] and his company stubbornly clung to the notion that the main thing people wanted from their computers was word processing; even after the company realized its error...it always seemed to be a step behind. By 1992, Wang Laboratories was bankrupt... "

"BlackBerry's co-chief executives, Mike Lazaridis and James Balsillie, simply didn't take the iPhone seriously at first—just as An Wang didn't take the personal computer seriously. After all, the iPhone had a touch screen that made it more difficult to write the kind of long, serious, work-related e-mails that BlackBerry users took for granted. The iPhone was a toy, they thought....

"More than that, though, 'BlackBerry had a huge installed base, and they were afraid to walk away from it,' said Carolina Milanesi, a research vice president with the Gartner Group. This is a problem that often plagues dominant companies. They are so

concerned with playing defense—protecting what they have built—that they stand paralyzed as new competitors arise with business models they can't, or won't, replicate.”

Thus Nocera. And now for the question that's niggled at me ever since I read the column: what has this to do with church? More than we'd care to imagine, I'll bet. I'm talking here of church in the small “c” sense of the organizations and institutions we establish, develop, and maintain as mechanisms for pulling people together and delivering the Gospel to them. Out of that will emerge—often, not always—that miracle of the Holy Spirit's creation that we confess in the Creeds: Church large “C”, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, the future of which is as far beyond question as the resurrection and ascension of Christ. We see this entity dimly, if at all; though we do believe in it, as we keep reminding each other whenever the Creeds are said. Mostly what fills our eyes is the little “c” stuff of buildings, assemblies, constitutions, liturgies, budgets, parish rolls, weekly programs, publications, websites, musical arrangements, leadership specifications, and all the other artifacts that accompany whatever ecclesiastical subculture we happen to belong to. We get attached to those artifacts, if not addicted to them. The latter verb applies the minute we can't imagine big “C” Church apart from them. Isn't that the point at which we fall into the trap that ensnared Wang and BlackBerry? It's not as if the Gospel depends for its delivery on German or Scandinavian hymnody, or on an eight-year program of post-secondary education for pastors, or on the great host of other good and useful things that we and our predecessors have invested heaps of effort and time in developing and honing. So much of it has served us well. What oafs we would be if didn't thank God for it. But it's equally oafish not to notice how the artifacts we treasure look and sound to others like clumsy outdated junk, barely penetrable and all but unusable. When I was in South

Africa in June, I stayed with some magnificently hospitable families, the members of which were either bi- or tri-lingual, German being the default language when no one else was around. But with a guest in the home, everyone used the guest's language, which in my case meant English. Can we imagine congregations that would treat their guests with equal courtesy when it came to the dialects of music and liturgy? Or how about an ecclesiastical jurisdiction that would overhaul its model of supplying word-and-sacrament ministry because the one that has worked for us—full-time pastor, pay and benefits coughed up by the congregation she serves—can't begin to work for the urban poor who need the Good News preached to them as much as anybody does. (Thus Christ, cf. Lk. 7:22.) Come to think of it, there are outfits around who have figured these things out, they're just not our outfits; and if they should thrive while we wane, mayhap we'd do well to read in this the judgment of God. If we're too stuck on nonessentials to deliver the essential Gospel goods, then he'll find someone else who will.

Gloomy thoughts for a late August evening, but there it is. Responses, anyone?

Scrap 3. Why Law-and-Gospel types need to sort out the matters touched on in Scrap 2.

In a word, they don't get it, they being today's versions of the crowds that tagged along with Jesus in the Gospel accounts. Stumbling into churches like ours, they miss the real deal of promise, forgiveness, and genuine hope because they can't get past the unappealing packages we serve it in. Still, they're earnest about religion and they see themselves as earnestly Christian—and here's the sort of thing that they imagine this to be:

“See, the whole point of being a Christian means you follow the

teachings of Christ.”

This is from one Allan Clifton, ranting on forwardprogressives.com about the failure of Republicans to meet this standard. Doubtless he means well. If only he'd allow St. Paul to clue him in on what “the whole point of being a Christian” is really all about.

Back to gloomy thoughts: I'll bet there are scads of folks in our congregations who would join Clifton in missing “the whole point.” But that's a line of thought to pursue some other evening.

Scrap 4: Contributions, anyone?

We welcome them with open arms. We'll give them a careful eye. We'll either pass them along or tell you why we didn't. In any case, better your thoughtful essay than my spur-of-the-moment meanderings. Which said—

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

#792 The ELCA's New Bishop

Colleagues,

I get to this a few days late, the week having been filled with much else, chiefly the work people pay me to do, but also some distractions. Of the latter the main one was a sudden urge on Wednesday to spend some time watching the video feed from a churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America. It was taking place in Pittsburgh.

As a rule I pay less heed to big church meetings than the folks who organize them would want me to. This one was off my radar all together. The forecast had predicted an unusually tame-and-lame event, with not much on the agenda apart from the perfunctory reelection of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson.

But then came Tuesday, and an evening post on Facebook which suggested that a genuine contest for the bishop's office was unfolding for some reason, and that one of the persons involved was my own bishop, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton of the ELCA's Northeastern Ohio Synod. That caught my attention. So, yes, I forsook some other duties the next day to watch a bit of the action, just enough to gather that the people in Pittsburgh were seeing and hearing what we in Northeastern Ohio have witnessed for the past six and a half years. So when the news rolled in at day's end that Liz Eaton was the ELCA's Presiding Bishop-elect, I wasn't at all surprised; and I also thanked God.

Later came the note from a Crossings colleague, asking if and what I knew about Elizabeth Eaton, a person he hadn't heard of until this week. I told him I'd answer him here. That's what the rest of this is about, with comments amplified somewhat for the sake of readers who live, work, and serve outside the purview of the ELCA.

I like Bishop Eaton a lot. Others in my synod of 180 or so congregations like her too. That was demonstrated vividly two-and-a-half months ago when she cruised to reelection for a second full term as our bishop here. I was by no means the only person who spent much of Wednesday ruing the thought of losing her.

Why those others appreciate her so well I can only guess. Her wit, perhaps. Her skill as a speaker and her ease in front of a

crowd. I assume that many would offer thoughts about her strength, her fairness, her willingness to grasp the nettle that screams for attention, and to deal with it decisively and effectively. I applaud her gracious grit. The past four years have been especially tough on ELCA synod bishops. Theirs is the face of the ELCA at the local level, and in that capacity they've had to meet time and again with people aggrieved and angered by the decisions of the 2009 assembly that opened the church's clergy roster to partnered gay and lesbian pastors. Bishop Eaton has caught as much of this flak as anyone. She has handled it kindly yet firmly. She has also bent over backwards to underscore that the decisions of 2009 call chiefly for mutual respect among those who disagree on the matters at issue; and in her dealings with the aggrieved she has modeled that respect. I wish I could say that this has been noticed, acknowledged, and appreciated to the extent it should have been, but it has not. As elsewhere, congregations and pastors have peeled off, in some cases leaving their erstwhile bishop on the receiving end of sins against the eighth commandment. She has suffered some sharp sorrow, I should think.

These things aside, what I've valued most about Bishop Eaton is her rock-solid integrity as a Lutheran pastor and bishop. She knows her confessional stuff, she puts it to work, and she's not the least bit shy about pushing others to do the same. When she preaches I hear the Gospel. I don't mean that I hear the word "gospel" bandied about mantra-like, as if everyone knows what the word signifies and will somehow be blessed and fed if you repeat it often enough. That's been the fashion of too much official preaching over the course of the ELCA's brief twenty-five-year history, or so it seems to me. Bishop Eaton, by contrast, doesn't say "gospel," she preaches Gospel; that is, she points to the Son of God hanging on a cross and tells you why that's good for you. That's why I suggested her last week as

the preacher for the Tuesday evening eucharist at next January's Crossings conference; and when others on the planning committee urged me to extend an invitation, I did so. There was joy all around when she accepted. Whether that arrangement still stands, who can say?

Was this Gospel-preaching gift of gifts the reason for her election on Wednesday? In small part, perhaps; though what I continue to sense of the small "s" spirit that animates the ELCA leaves me guessing that her identity as a woman mattered much more to many of the people who voted for her. So be it. Before they know it, they'll find themselves strangely blessed by something they didn't bargain for, a presiding bishop whose stewardship of the office will leave us all wondering why anybody paid attention to the male/female thing in the first place, or would ever do so again. Have all of us in Northeastern Ohio learned that lesson over the past six and half years? If not, we're slow learners. We're bound to find out more about that in a couple of months when there's a special election to fill the yawning void here.

As for others in the ELCA, if they keep their ears open they'll soon discover that they finally have a pastor-in-chief who treasures the distinction between Law and Gospel and the contribution this makes to the ongoing mission of Christ in the world. Those who listened carefully to Bishop Eaton on Wednesday will have already picked this up. Could this be why they chose her over the other candidates? I'd sure like to think so. Saying this, I'll also dare to think that the Holy Spirit has used the aforementioned small "s" spirit—in the ELCA's case, a persistent yen to mirror values of that part of the wider culture deemed progressive—to pull off a coup and get the ELCA on the track where it belongs, at least where the bishop's office is concerned. It would hardly be the first time that God has pulled a fast one on the Zeitgeist and all the other powers and

principalities out there. Fast ones, come to think of it, are one of God's delicious specialties. So says St. Paul, among others, and he says it more than once.

Final word to those in the Crossings community who belong to the ELCA, and to anyone else who cares about faithful and joyful confession in the Church: take it for granted that your new bishop has your backs. Thank God for her. Pray for her. Honor her in the fidelity of your own confessing for the sake of the Church. And may the grace of God sustain us all.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

Addendum:

In the bag of yesterday's email was the following report by a member of the Pittsburgh assembly. Jim Lillie is his name. I don't know him. His report got to me by the usual forwarding route. I backtracked through that and got his permission to share the report with all of you. I think you'll appreciate his first-hand account of what he witnessed on Wednesday. -JB

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, bishop of the ELCA Northeastern Ohio Synod, was elected Presiding Bishop of the ELCA at the 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly on August 14, 2013.

When I was appointed to be a Voting Member of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly, I looked over the agenda and thought that it would be a calm meeting. The only major actions were a Social Statement on Criminal Justice and the election of our Presiding Bishop. The Social Statement looked to be noncontroversial, and Presiding Bishop Hanson was running for re-election, and I was sure that he would be re-elected. The Social Statement has yet to be voted on, but the election of Presiding Bishop took me

very much by surprise.

Using a process called Ecclesiastical Election, many people were nominated on the first ballot. However, the second ballot brought a surprise, with Bishop Hanson receiving fewer votes than on the first ballot, and several female Bishops receiving many votes.

Before the third ballot, each of the top seven candidates was given the opportunity to answer several questions. Three of the top seven chose not to stay in the race, and three of the remaining four candidates were female Bishops. The turn of events caused me to reexamine my vote. The female candidates seemed to be bringing a fresh attitude to the office of Presiding Bishop. The fourth ballot left just two candidates, Bishop Mark Hanson and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

The two candidates were again asked questions and given an opportunity to speak to the Assembly. Again, I was impressed by the attitudes, opinions, and plans expressed by Bishop Eaton.

The fifth and final ballot overwhelmingly elected Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA.

The process of discernment for us Voting Members was a difficult, surprising, and exhausting one. We all felt very strongly that we were shaping the immediate future of the ELCA. I believe that all of us took our roles in the election totally seriously. We also knew that we would be breaking new ground in church governance by electing a female Presiding Bishop.

I believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us in many different ways, sometimes in spreadsheets, occasionally in visions, and often in such mundane things as elections. I seriously felt the power of something greater than the 950 of us assembled in the hall as we listened to the candidates and cast our ballots. The

theme of this Churchwide Assembly is “Always being made New.” I believe that the ELCA is, indeed, in the process of “being made new.”

#791 Sin, Sight, and a Vision of God

Colleagues,

Two months ago today I was at a Lutheran church in Cape Town testing the patience of delegates to an assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Cape). I hope one of these Thursdays to tell you a little about that adventure and the saints I encountered in the course of it. For now I mention merely that I’d been asked to fill an entire morning with an exploration of the topic, “The Vision of God for the Church.” So that’s what I did. All present survived the experience. Today we send you a snippet of what they listened to.

Why this snippet and not another? Because it digs for the matter that’s finally at issue when people start talking about vision, and about God’s vision in particular. We of the Crossings crowd go looking for this sort of thing as a matter of course. Not that it makes for pleasant viewing. Still, how else does one come to revel in the vision of visions that St. Paul calls “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6)?

May the musings here help to nudge you once again in the direction of that revelry.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From "God's Two Great Visions for the Visually Impaired," Part One of a two-part presentation on the theme, "The Vision of God for the Church"—

Let's dig into this theme in earnest by starting at the start, in a place called Eden, or in whatever room your mother happened to be when, with much pain and suffering, she squeezed you into the world.

The story of Eden, after all, is a story about all of us. It gives the deep and true account not so much of who we are, but of how we are as human beings in the world, and it helps us to understand why this is so.

I observe in passing that people who fail to see themselves inside the Eden story are delusional in the extreme. Either that, or they've never taken the trouble to listen properly to the story in all its terse and dreadful detail.

The Church is of little help to such people, by the way, when it relies too heavily on its in-house jargon in discussions of the story. We pepper such discussions with the word "sin" and we confuse things all the more when we doctor it up with the adjective "original." In America these days the word "sin" is in disrepute. It's considered bad form to use it in public. The phrase "original sin" is simply mystifying. Christians themselves are hard-pressed to agree on what it means, let alone on whether it provides an appropriate account of the human condition. Baptists say no, of course, and in America's churches, at least, the Baptist view prevails. I think there's a certain wistfulness involved here, a kind of dreaming that drips with longing, dreaming itself being a form of vision. One looks

at the newborn babe, and one sees, or rather, one aches to see a blank tablet on which nothing has yet been written. This leaves open the possibility that whatever might be recorded there in the future will be in all respects a good record, gentle, strong, courageous, accomplished, perfectly pleasing to each and every eye, God's eye included. The term "original sin" assaults that dream. To call the baby a sinner is like pouring black ink on a fresh piece of exquisite paper, and who wants to do that? At the very least it seems rude.

Oddly, no one seems to bat an eye when scientists observe that every newborn is in significant measure a prisoner of its genetic code; and it is simple common sense to expect that every person is shaped and limited even before birth by the family and circumstances into which the mother will bear it; and this is so even in societies in which class is not so great an issue as it is in others.

We Christians would do well to recognize how the word "sin" also describes realities that every thinking person can admit to without much effort. In other words, sin too is a matter of common sense, if only we'd take the time to describe what it points to. As I mentioned, the word itself has long since been rendered useless outside our own circles by an irrational prejudice; though even within our own circles the prejudice grows. That's my view, at any rate; and I toss it out the only way I can, as a sinner doing what sinners do in the company of other sinners. I state my view. *My* view. That's what sin is fundamentally about, each person risking his own view in possible or even likely competition with the views of others, and with the view of God in particular.

As it happens, that's the first thing the Eden story describes when it rolls up its sleeves and moves from the preamble of Genesis 2 into the nut of the matter in Genesis 3. You know how

it goes, of course, though perhaps a bit of emphasis will help to make it even clearer:

“When the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise”—or to open the *inner* eye, as one might say; then “she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then”—notice—“the eyes of both were *opened*, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:6-7). Here the irony scorches like acid. As if the silly fig leaves they scramble for will be an improvement on the glorious skins that God has seen fit to robe them in, skins that prior to their eating they have quite enjoyed seeing and being seen in; as if the prior enjoyment was merely a consequence of defective eyesight, now suddenly made better.

In fact the seeing is worse; and what the story describes at this point is the corruption of human vision, a scrambling of the eyes. Prior to the eating, each has seen as the other saw, and both have seen as God sees. Now she sees for herself, as we say, and he for himself. Or, again as we say, each has his or her distinct point of view; and as every husband/wife team I have ever known will testify, they will quickly feel this as an affliction, a thing sometimes to joke about, gently, one hopes, but at other times to bear with gritted teeth.

Again the acidic irony: their eyes were opened; they knew that they were naked, as if that were somehow a mark of progress. Instead it's a regression, or, as the Church has always said, a fall. This new knowing has quite destroyed a former knowing. Each used to know how the other saw things. Each took it for granted that the other was looking on him or her with unmitigated joy. Suddenly neither is so sure about this anymore. Hence the compelling need to cover up those parts most likely to

put a glint in the other's eye, and for all one knows, an evil glint, though how can one be certain? Still, better safe than sorry; so please, dear, pass the fig leaf just in case. And with that—a key point—the two make it plain that they are strangers to each other in a way they hadn't been before.

It's about to get worse. Much worse. Enter God, coming for the evening stroll and the spot of chitchat, and the two go into hiding (Gen. 3:8). They take it for granted that God will not like what God is now obliged to see, and so they hide from his eyes. Every ten year old boy knows exactly what this is about. With only the slightest prompting he'll recall, for example, how mother had seen that it was not good for balls to be tossed around inside the house and had said so very clearly, yet on that particular afternoon he and his friend saw this instead as a delightful thing to do. (From a mother's point of view, boys are surpassingly strange creatures, are they not?) In any case, within a matter of minutes Mum's favorite lamp, the family heirloom, lay broken on the floor; and at the sound of the car in the driveway the lad went into hiding. He had to. He couldn't help it. He had no choice. His will was enslaved, as Luther would say, held captive by his dread. He feared the look of wrath and disappointment in his mother's eyes, and even more he feared what she would say now. He spent the next many hours, the next few days, perhaps, estranged from his mother. He flinches to this day whenever he recalls the bitterness of it.

In the story Adam gets summoned out of hiding as every Adam always does, or at some point will. In the conversation that follows it becomes immediately obvious that his vision is badly damaged. He does not and cannot perceive the present situation in the same way God does. Notice how God's tone with Adam is firm, yet gentle. It begs for honest confession. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree?" (Gen. 3:11) As if God doesn't know. This is God seeing an errant son on whom

his heart is fixed. If only the son would use his eyes to see a gracious father, brimming over with mercy and compassion. He doesn't. He cannot. Instead he responds like a cornered dog. Listen to him snarl: "The woman *you* gave me..." (Gen. 3:12).

No wonder God responds as God does, by speaking for the first time in an unconditioned future tense, no ifs, ands, or buts restraining it in any way: "Dust you are; to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). Here in eight terse words, five in Hebrew, is the first great vision of God for every Adam's future, and it is dreadful. Every Adam or Eve I have ever bumped into resents it bitterly. That includes the Adam who stares at me from a mirror every morning. God tells us what he sees, and now that our own vision is badly skewed we regard this as arbitrary and punitive. In fact it's mostly descriptive. Well, of course it is. If you fill up a world with people, each committed to seeing things in his or her own way, each unable or unwilling to see things as others see them, then you can guarantee a time to come when these people will start to kill each other, a point the Cain and Abel story underscores; and now and then the slaughter will be immense. In the meantime they will cluster for safety and security's sake in groups, never altogether happy groups, each of them rife with quarrels and dissensions about what to do and who gets to do it, but even so, as groups they will stand in opposition to other groups in an endless contest to determine who gets whose way at whose expense; and some will lose; and because of this, God whose mercy encompasses not some but all his children, ensures that all will lose. Again, "dust you all are, and to dust you shall return with no exception." Let's call this what it is, a matter of simple justice. I die because it isn't fair for the rich American to live forever, not when he buys cheap clothes at the expense of Bangladeshi women he does not know or care about, women ground down and killed by greedy owners who see it as somehow good to pack them by the thousands

into unsafe buildings. Isn't this the very thing that the first vision of God encompasses?

In any case, God guarantees this vision by driving the man and the woman away from the garden, away from the tree of life; and that's how this story ends, by laying out the reality into which every human child is always born. And yes, a dreadful, bitter business it is, if not always from our point of view, then certainly from God's. This is not what he had in view when once he looked at the world that he had made and called it "very good."

To sum this up, come again with me to a hospital room in Cleveland, Ohio, or to a shack in a Cape Town slum, for that matter. Here sits a mother, exhausted yet radiantly happy, and in her arms the newborn, already suckling at her breast. She looks adoringly at the child; she dreams her dreams. You don't dare say this out loud—the mother will hate you for it, the nurse or midwife will slash at you with her eyes—yet here is the truth. This baby was born with defective vision, flawed eyesight. He cannot see as God sees; he will never see as those around him see, not exactly, that is, never precisely. He too is bound to insist, like every other human being ever born, on seeing for himself; and because this is so he will always be in some respect a stranger even to those to those who know and love him best. Of course the great mass of the human race will see and know him not, nor will it care to. He in turn will merrily return that favor. Meanwhile his life, like every other human life, will be an ongoing quarrel with God. Because of all this, even now, already now, his future contains a moment when his eyesight must fail once and for all; and from that moment there is simply no escape, none, that is, that he or any other human being, save one, can hope to conjure up.

This is what it means to say of this child that he—or she—is

born a sinner. A sinner by origin. And it's for her sake—for his sake—that God saw fit in the fullness of time to create a thing called Church.

#790 1) A Christ-confessing Mystery. 2) A Brief Christ-confessing “Aha!”

Colleagues,

Ed Schroeder is back this week with a couple of gifts. The main one is a book review that leaves him uncharacteristically scratching his head over a confessional conundrum: how, where Christ is concerned, can one profoundly “get it” and just as profoundly “not get it” at one and the same time? You’ll notice that he leaves the question hanging. If you’d care to mull it over with him in an open forum of sorts, send us a note with your reflections.

The second gift emerged from Ed’s perusal, earlier this week, of Ron Starenko’s first-rate Sabbatheology analysis of this coming Sunday’s Gospel, the Parable of the Rich Fool. You’ll want to [check that out](#) yourself if you haven’t seen it yet. Then (and only then) take a look at the cherry Ed adds to Ron’s well-iced cake. You’ll find it appended to the book review. If you’re preaching this Sunday, you won’t want to miss it.

On another note, colleague Carol Braun is briefly in town (Cleveland, Ohio) for the funeral of her grandmother, Edna Braun. Edna fell asleep in the Lord as she slept this past

Sunday night. At the funeral home this afternoon I learned that she started almost every day of her 95 old-creation years with Luther's morning prayer, followed, per Luther's counsel, with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father. Then, for good measure, she'd recite the books of the Bible. "I know my own," says the Shepherd, "and my own know me" (John 10:14). Indeed they do. Thanks be to God for the witness—quiet, life-long, imperceptibly effective—of one who knew him very well.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Bruno Corduan, **Truth, Grace, and Security.**

Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications [Wipf & Stock] 2012, 209 pages. Paper.

This is a tough book for a Lutheran to review. Luther (and Bonhoeffer too) get quoted now and then in support of the author's theology. Yet he also tells us,

"Neither baptism nor communion are sacraments in the sense that they cause anything to happen. They are symbols of the believer's union with God." (149)

"Once we have personally accepted [Jesus'] redemptive act through repentance and conversion, we are children of the living God... As a response for the acceptance of God's act of mercy and our new birth, we allowed ourselves to be baptized." (182)

"In baptism you declare that the bond that you have formed with God by your repentance is sealed, and you confess in the presence of God and the world:

1. I am now a part of Jesus...
2. I have been crucified with Jesus...

3. I have been buried with Christ...
4. I have been resurrected with Jesus...

None of these items is accomplished by the waters of baptism. But the baptism shows that our faith manifests itself in obedience, and we demonstrate this new obedience by baptism." (146f.)

So he is a Baptist, not a Lutheran. OK, there are a variety of gifts.

And as he tells us his life story in the book's first half—a nail-biter narrative of a Bible-believing, Jesus-surrendered, chutzpah-endowed teenager in Hitler's Germany—we learn that Baptist pastor is where he finally winds up late in life. But only after a wild ride, not only during the Nazi era as an adolescent, but also as a grown-up in Germany after the war in the Foreign Office. Also a bit of a ride across the faith-spectrum. For it was Lutheran-land where he was born and infant-baptized in Alt Schlawe (1926) in Pomerania, Germany—not far from where my own grandfather was also born and baptized (1871).

But he's also a Methodist in the original meaning of that denominational term, namely, privy to the "method" whereby sinners become Christians: "We have to follow the proper order of events. First comes commitment to Jesus. Then comes the redemption from guilt and sin. After that comes the call to discipleship and to service in Jesus' sheltering presence" (131).

There's more. He opts for Erasmus over Luther on the topic of the human will.

- "God has created us...in order to have partners who have free wills that they will submit to his will." (181)
- "What would human beings have been without free will? We

would have been like robots fully dependent on God's will. People can today, just as in the beginning, exercise their own free will." (112) [Note: from him sin has not impaired human free will.]

- So it comes as no surprise when Corduan gives humans some initiative in coming to faith: "When we make ourselves fully available to Jesus, we are grafted into him, and we are part of the body of Jesus!" (130)

The Bible is the solid rock for his faith.

- "The Bible, and only the Bible, gives us the clear instructions from the living God for making our pilgrimage through this life." (73)
- "The Bible teaches unequivocally..."
- "It is important to know what God says in the Bible and then to follow his instructions." He speaks of "the fundamentals of my faith, which I have found in the Bible" (74).
- "The source of my faith and my assurance is simply the Bible... The Bible is not a history book. Nonetheless the events reported within its pages are unquestionably true. And that includes the first eleven chapters of the Bible." (110)
- "Either we believe what the Bible says, or we do not" (116); "Road map to Jesus. That is the Bible" (129).
- "The Bible tells us everything we need to know." (199)
- "My faith rests on the firm foundation of the Bible." (209, the book's last page)

So why should I review a book that only puts more stress on my aged (four-score-years-plus) heart? Why doesn't he say "Gospel" in all those places where he says "Bible"? Why doesn't he see that it's not the water, but the promise "in and with the water" that makes Baptism a God-offer to me and not a me-offer to God?

Why go with Erasmus and not Luther when you claim Luther on your side? And even more when you get a bigger/better Gospel with Luther's take on the human-will debate?

And I haven't yet mentioned some even bigger stressors that come to this old Augsburg confessor along with Corduan's conservative evangelicalism, but I will.

- "Theologians have promulgated an erroneous concept. It is called original sin." (201)
- The dozens and dozens of times the words 'must' and 'required' and 'obedience' and 'full assurance' and 'decision' appear in the book.
- Underlying these is this: "In our conversion...we are born again; we become new creatures... Only now, as a consequence of our renewal, is the law released to perform its real function. It provides us with an understanding of the boundaries or what is pleasing to God as we pursue a life within God's will" (81). The very first use of God's law is to give Christians the rules for living. That's almost a verbatim quote from John Calvin, spoken by him contra Luther five hundred years ago.

So why review this book at all?

1. Well, we both have family roots in Pomerania!
2. I was asked to do it.
3. Corduan is a Christ-confessor and a Nazi-era survivor. Both at the same time. That invites attention. I was an exchange student in Germany shortly after WWII. Many of my fellow students had also been both at the same time. I spent hours listening to them. Bruno was another such witness.

Which brings us to the first seventy pages of his book. His life story.

Alt Schlawe was Lutheran-land when Bruno was born there in 1926. His parents were members of the territorial Lutheran church, but with an add-on. They were also members of one of the Pietist "little-groups" that dotted the Lutheran landscape. "Our family lived in the Fellowship House of the 'Christian faith Community.' This evangelical fellowship, which considered itself a part of the state church, belonged to the Association of Pentecostal Assemblies... Aside from Sunday school, I also eagerly attended the children's services of the Lutheran State Church" (10).

When Bruno was eight years old, his mother died. "I had only one thought, namely, 'Where is my mommy now?' That question gripped me and did not let me go for many years. ... Since my father was a lay preacher, he had a small library. I would often secretly search through it...to find the answer to the question. Through a special grace I was given a clear answer: my mommy was now with Jesus. That solution brought me peace...I simultaneously recognized the necessity of belonging to Jesus myself. I did so in the best way I knew how: by resolving to let Jesus be my Lord and turning my life over to him—quietly and without any outward ceremony." (9)

He tried to tell his father and (by then) stepmother, but "neither...took me seriously. Instead they instructed me to pursue a life style based on my works rather than on a direct relationship with my Lord. They admonished me to conform my life from then on out to God's laws and various rules of piety. I was disappointed, but not frustrated. My life with Jesus had started." (9)

And he never looked back. That's the golden thread throughout the next eighty pages of autobiography, his journey "from day laborer's son to diplomat," which is the actual title of his German original book.

He concludes: "I was born a weak baby in the bleak hut of a day laborer, and my chances for survival, let alone 'success' were bleak as well. But in the preceding pages, I have pointed out that God is not dependent on our human qualifications. He can use us without formal scholar training and degrees. Jesus, my Lord, saved me, and I trusted in him. It was he who enabled me to accomplish all that I have done both professionally and in his service for the proclamation of the gospel. I have recorded some of these events in order to give hope and courage to those who are struggling with their faith." (69)

Here are the teen-age segments of that wild ride:

1. School Years during the Hitler Regime
2. Membership in the Hitler Youth
3. Call Up for Military Service
4. In the Navy
5. Testimony on Board a Wrecked Ship

He'd just turned 19 when the war ended.

When one of our neighbors here at the old folks' home, a German woman born the same year as Bruno, who also survived Hitler's twelve-year-long Third Reich, read the book, she said, "I can't believe that he was such a Jesus-witness and still survived under Hitler. But it sounds like he's telling the truth."

Bruno's adulthood in postwar Germany is also a wild ride. With no university education—an absolute MUST, doctor's degree included, in order to be anybody in Germany—doors open for him into federal government service. He becomes a diplomat for the German government and for NATO, negotiating multimillion-dollar contracts, achieving greater success than anyone could have imagined. All the while actively linked to the conservative evangelical heritage of his childhood, that now puts him into a pastoral role at "Christus-kirche" in his retirement community,

“Pilgerheim” [Pilgrims’ Home] in Weltersbach, Germany.

For this reviewer, this book was a wild ride too. A yin/yang, with my yea, yea, yea during the Part 1 autobiography, “A Life Guided by Jesus: The Son of a Day Laborer Becomes a Diplomat.” Then my ouch, ouch, ouch while reading Part 2, “Basic Concepts Derived from the Bible” that have “led and encouraged me throughout my long life” (73). He was 82, a widower, when he wrote that.

How to connect the yin and the yang?

One facet of this conundrum showed up for me when Bruno quoted several verses of Bonhoeffer’s hymn “By Gracious Powers.” Key elements of Lutheran theology that anchored Dietrich’s faith are pointedly negated in Bruno’s “basic concepts.” How does that compute?

There is one item that never appears on Bruno’s pages. He never tells of any “Anfechtung,” any challenge, that ever threatened his Jesus-connection. Maybe there were some and he never told us. Jesus and Bruno are always side-by-side in the roller-coaster ride of his life, and never do we hear that either of them ever fell out, stepped out, of the roller-coaster car. Were all those years so un-conflicted? No valleys, no shadows? Or was it another “special grace,” more of the same as the one that answered his Anfechtung at age 8 about his mother, that then led to his primal bonding with Jesus? Special grace indeed that would be.

For now, the best may be for me to remember that “there are a variety of gifts, but the same spirit.”

Yet I can’t comprehend why items that sound like gifts to me—gifts linked to the Gospel-hub of the wagon-wheel of theology—are un-gifts for Bruno. Gifts such as:

- Baptism and the Lord's supper as Gospel-promise offers;
- God's law as not the best guide for the Christian life, but Christ himself as Lord and Master;
- Free will as not only not necessary (while Bruno says it is, with extensive rational argument), but conflictive with the Gospel, a Pelagian slide toward Christ having died in vain;
- the Aha! that "require" and "must" (you gotta!) are the rhetoric of God's law, now blessedly replaced with the Gospel's vocabulary of "offer" and "you get to."

Now closer to 83 than to 82, I'll pass this on to you co-crossers. If you see more light at the end of my tunnel, speak up.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Addendum: a reflection on Luke 12:13, in a note to Pr. Ron Starenko—

"Someone in the crowd said to (Jesus), 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?'"

[This] line of the pericope...has recently brought a new Aha! to me.

Namely, that Jesus says "no" to being a judge or arbiter of "justice" in the realm of God's left hand. "Not my job."

Thus contradicting all the never-ending drumbeats today for Jesus as the challenger to the Roman Empire, as crusader for peace and justice in the old creation, as peasant revolutionary against the system, etc. Ad nauseam.

“Not my job” he says here. “Abba has assigned to me another task, another agenda. To get sinners forgiven. Too bad, if y’all think that’s a trivial assignment. Or that anybody can do it. Or that since Good Friday and Easter it’s all over and there are no more sinners around who need forgiveness. So you Christians can get go to work on other ‘bigger’ agendas, like, returning the world to the Garden of Eden.”

And nowhere in the gospels is Jesus’ “Thanks, but no, thanks. Not my job” ever contradicted.

So it seems to me.

EHS.

#789 The Gospel Lives!

Colleagues,

I’m at the age where arrogance and world-weariness start combining in what John Bunyan would call a slough of despond. I read and hear the rubbish that gets peddled in the church these days under the rubric “gospel,” and wonder if anybody forty years hence will still get it as we did in our day. (Implication, God help me: “Ain’t we grand for having gotten it as we did.”)

But then comes last week’s treat of Matt Metevelis responding to Tim Hoyer, and, all the more refreshing since in this case I don’t know the author, the one we’re sending you today.

Candice Stone graduated this May from the Lutheran School of

Theology in Chicago. In a mystery I haven't penetrated, she's even so completing a "terminal internship" at Bethel Lutheran Church in University Heights, Missouri, under the tutelage of a schoolmate of mine, Pr. Bill Yancey. Bethel is also the congregation that Ed and Marie Schroeder have belonged to for the past many decades. And that's how it happened that Candice came to send us the sermon we share with you below. She preached it the Sunday before last (July 14) on the parable of the Good Samaritan, [Luke 10:25-37](#). Before reading you'll want to refresh yourself on the [Old Testament Lesson and Psalm](#) of the day.

Candice hits the same key notes that I tried to hit in my preaching on that same day, only she does it much more clearly and effectively, and in a way that draws the entire listening audience into the promise and joy of Christ. I am humbled (thank God), but even more I'm greatly cheered. In the generation behind me is yet another servant of Christ who gets it vividly and well, and by whom the Gospel will be well served indeed. Be refreshed by what she writes—and then pray for her, and for all others of her ilk who will keep the Word of Christ in play as coming decades unfold.

This just in, by the way: Candice will soon be knuckling down to the arduous task of filing paperwork toward a first call in the ELCA. If you know of a congregation that's hunting for a pastor who knows how to preach, you might drop her name. I've also just learned that her connection to the Crossings community runs deeper than I had guessed. She gives much of the credit for knowing the sound of genuine Gospel to Ron Neustadt, her pastor and mentor for several years at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Belleville, Illinois. Ron continues in retirement to serve as one of Crossings' current pillars.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

A Sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, by Intern Candice Stone

A professor of mine, when talking about our relationship with God, said, "The young demand justice, the old will settle for mercy." I have reframed that in my mind, not based on age, but based on where I'm at in life—what season I am in. There are times when my energy is high and my concerns are very much rooted in the daily here and now, and I want justice. And then there have been times, serious times of heartbreak or sickness, where all I really wanted was assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness. All this is to say that our God speaks to us in all of our seasons. I realize this whenever Jesus shares lessons through story, because stories can speak to many seasons; they are not usually speaking to just one.

Today's story is the Good Samaritan. Let's rehash a bit. There is person, a man who has been stripped and beaten by robbers, then left for dead on the side of the road. Lying there, we don't know what the injuries are exactly; we just know all he can do is lie there and wait for death. He is stuck in that ditch. A priest passes him and probably judges him defiled, doesn't want mess with purity laws, so he leaves him. Likewise the Levite walks by, probably judges him a different ethnicity, doesn't want to mess with a dirty foreigner, so he leaves him. Finally, the Samaritan walks by. And surely like the other two men, he makes a judgment on this naked, dying man. But his judgment is that he needs to be pulled from the ditch. He judges that he needs life. So he does what it takes to give it to him. Binds his wounds, feeds him, takes him to an inn, pays for his care.

So who's who in this story, who are we, who are you? Who is Jesus? If this story were purely about giving instruction, then we are the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan. If we are the

Levite or priest, then our instructions are to quit being so cruel and uncaring, so Letter-of-the-Law, and to help our poor neighbor. If we're lucky enough to be the Samaritan, then this is an "Atta Boy!" story. Good job, Good Samaritan! Good work following instructions and helping people in need no matter what they look like or who they are.

But we, being good Lutherans, know this story is not just simply instructions. We've gotten those before and they didn't work—look at our Old Testament readings! No, this story is about justification. Jesus tells this story because the lawyer he's talking to wants to know what it takes to be justified before God. In other words, what does it take to be right with God, to be assured of life through God?

And because this story is about being right with God, we don't get to be the Good Samaritan, but neither do we get to be the priest or the Levite. We are, to be direct, that poor soul lying half dead in a ditch. This story is all about you, me, all of us lying in need of Jesus, our Good Samaritan, to come pull us out and into life with God and each other. Just like we don't know the exact injuries of the dying man, what keeps us in our ditch depends on our season in life.

Perhaps it's that big season, that big question about eternity that troubles us. And in that case, we wonder, "Will God be merciful, will the promise of eternal life be real for me"? The Good News for us is that our Good Samaritan, Jesus, accomplishes all things for us. We are justified by our faith, our trust in Christ whose life, death, and resurrection we get to share in. That is no small season, and it rears its head at us again and again in our lives both when we encounter death and finally when it encounters us. And so, in that season, we need to hear often of how Jesus promises to pull us out of that ditch and into eternal life with God; to hear that no matter what our injuries

look like, how bruised or damaged we are by this world, by sin or doubt, Jesus will bring us into life with God.

But there are other seasons of life, where something else is keeping us in the ditch, away from life here and now: life in our communities, life in our churches, in our families, in our relationships. At the text study I go to, we were talking about this. And one of my good friends who is an openly gay pastor in the ELCA said, "Heck, my whole community didn't get pulled out of the ditch until 2009!" It's true, the Holy Spirit is still working to pull people out of ditches who are there not because they need mercy for sin, but because they need justice now. I don't know where anybody stands this morning, but there are all kinds of people on both sides of every verdict in this country that need to be pulled out of ditches for reasons of sin, or mercy, or justice. That is the work of a God of all seasons, whose Good Samaritan Son is constantly pulling us into life eternal and life present.

The question today is, "Where are you? What season are you in?" Maybe both are weighing on you. Maybe neither right now. Maybe you are in one of those blessed seasons where you are just assured and nothing has got you in the ditch, nothing is keeping you from life. And what a blessing it is for the world, for your community, if you are in that great season where you're even able to do some relief work with Jesus; where you can look around and see, "Hey, there are people in ditches, let's do something here!" Make no mistake, that is the Holy Spirit working through you to be a Good Samaritan, not because you're instructed to, but because you are hooked into Jesus through faith and he is working through you.

But maybe that's not your season right now. And maybe you're needing to be pulled out of the ditch right now. And what keeps you there is not for others to judge or know. I pray the

communities you find yourself in this week don't fall into that priest or Levite role for you. But if you are in a ditch season, be assured by *this* community that the Holy Spirit is at work for life present. And in case you can't see it happening here and now, let me reframe this story for you one more time.

Jesus, your Good Samaritan pulled you in from the road today and brought you in to the innkeeper's home. It's his Father's House. Isn't it lovely? It's even got a pipe organ! And he washes your wounds. Actually he washes you totally clean of all that separates you from life with God with waters of Holy Baptism. Pretty soon, he's going to nourish you with bread and wine, his own body given to you at the table of Holy Communion. And last but not least, he turns to the innkeeper and says, "Take care of her, take care of him. I'll pay whatever it takes."

And he does. Jesus is so determined to bring life, so determined to pull us out of death, both eternally and presently, that he goes to the cross. In that decisive, sacrificial moment of love, Jesus gives us life for all seasons. Thanks be to God.

Bethel Lutheran Church
University City, Missouri

#788 An Exemplary Conversation (2)

In [Thursday Theology #787](#), we presented a letter from Pr. Tim Hoyer to Pr. Matt Metevelis in response to Matt's [brief essay](#) on the preacher's task of presenting Jesus as the ultimate goal. Now, as promised, we bring you Matt's replies to Tim's letter.

Matt followed the e-mailer's stylistic mode of inserting his replies directly into the text of Tim's original letter. I've decided to preserve this format, putting the text of Tim's letter (from [ThTh #787](#)) in italics and square brackets, while putting Matt's (new) replies in boldface.

Again, we expect you'll find this exchange edifying, not only for its theological substance but also—perhaps more importantly—for the spirit of Christian brotherhood in which it is carried out.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

*[Matt Metevelis,
The benefits of Jesus—his peace and mercy—be with you.]*
And also with you.

[You and I have in common Luther Seminary, for you got a degree there and so did I. However, I attended during the summer for four years while you attended fall, winter, and spring.]
I think we met in the summer of '06. It is great to hear from you. DDiv student I think I recall?

[Your concern for using Jesus as the final goal of preaching is what all of us preachers need to be concerned about. With great dismay I read other sermons and find Jesus is not used as the goal of the sermon, if he is mentioned at all.]

[My seminary was Christ Seminary-Seminex where I had Professors Bertram and Schroeder, who are the two who taught about "Crossings." But they were taught by a preacher and professor named Richard Caemmerer, who, amazingly, was my professor for preaching classes. (He was about eighty years old when he taught me.) His outline for a sermon was "goal, malady, means." There

was a goal a preacher wanted to get his listeners to. But there was a malady preventing the listeners from getting there. The means to get the listener from the malady to the goal was Jesus.]

I recognize the Crossings method. Thanks for the refresher. It must have been amazing to sit in Caemmerer's classes. The admonition he often made to "preach the blood" which I heard from another one of his students has been ringing in my head for years.

[There were two goals—faith in Jesus and faith in Jesus working in love for others.]

While I agree with the first goal I am suspicious of the theological construction of the second. How is "faith in Jesus working love for others" different from the fides caritate formata, "faith made active in love," doctrine thrown about by the Counter-Reformation church? Can I be loving without being faithful to Christ? Does faith in Christ make my love better or purer? I work here in a hospice with some of the most loving people on earth, who are convinced Christianity is bunk. How is their love different from mine?

[Crossings has its outline of Diagnosis/Prognosis, which is a more detailed outline of what happens in "goal, malady, means." Bertram took Caemmerer's outline and made the parts of those three steps more clear. Bertram took "malady" and made it three parts-external, internal, and eternal maladies. They were all what Caemmerer talked about, but they were not specifically described. The means is Step Four, or the first step of Prognosis, in that Jesus is the means by which our problem with God is overcome. Jesus is also the one we are given faith in (goal) and Jesus is the one who gives us love and his Spirit to deal with the situation or external problem we started with—a part of the malady.]

Fair enough—there are plenty of things that Jesus overcomes for

us. But he overcomes them by standing in their place. Our sins keep us from God; Jesus takes them to the cross to leave them there to hang (1 Pet 2) so that he can take their place in our hearts.

[In your ThTh #784, I think you wanted Jesus to be the goal of preaching, for to use Jesus as a means to something else made Jesus only a means to an end, thus making him less important. From ThTh #784, "Preaching is the place where the crucified God comes to meet us. When the gospel is preached, God comes in the crucified Christ to dwell with the congregation. Hearing the sermon, they are reclaimed by Christ in faith. In the words of the preacher, He is bleeding and crucified for them."]

[Is it enough to say that Jesus is crucified for me?]

Absolutely, the trick is sneaking the puck past the goalie of your old Adam so that you hear it.

[People will ask, "Why was he crucified for me?"]

And lately that's a good question. People are self-justifiers and don't see themselves as sinners for the most part. I've found that sin now has to be preached in terms of pain—physical, mental, and spiritual.

[To answer the question of why is to say Jesus died to do something for me. Jesus then becomes the means to do something for us.]

Jesus is the PERSON who does something for us. When I was first dating my wife I dropped about \$100 on her birthday and filled her dorm room with flowers so that she would know how much I cared about her. So, sure, I was the means, but convincing her to have me as part of her life was the goal. Think "happy exchange," Jesus does everything so that he can have us, not equip us for something else. He must be the "all in all."

[But to make Jesus the goal is to take away any reason for why

he is the goal. Why make Jesus the goal? What good is it for me if Jesus is the goal? Yes, that is a selfish concern to ask if Jesus is any good for me, but if Jesus is not good for me, then there is no love from Jesus to all of us.]

Melanchthon argued that “to know Christ is to know his benefits.” What you are bringing up here are the benefits—as if I said, “Preachers should point to Christ on the cross as if it were a beautiful work of art that will somehow change them.” That you bring this up is understandable, because I think I was unclear on this point. To preach Christ’s benefits as the goal I think is completely acceptable under the confessions. That seems to be what you are concerned about: eternal life, peace with God, forgiveness of sins, etc. All these are the benefits of Christ which must be preached when he is preached. The benefits are the “means” by which Christ is understood, apprehended, and trusted. (Christ is still the goal.)

[The Lutheran Confessions—the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession—say that we are to use Christ (glorify Christ, magnify Christ, honor Christ) and his death and resurrection (make Jesus the goal), and, here is the second part, use Jesus in a way that gives comfort to sinners (or consolation, as in the Summer 2013 Issue of the Crossings newsletter).]

Amen.

[Jesus himself used himself as a means. In Luke 7, where Jesus has dinner with Simon the Pharisee and where a woman from the city, a sinner, washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses his feet, and anoints them with ointment, Jesus says to that woman, “Your sins are forgiven you.” Jesus on the cross is not just there on the cross, but is on the cross for the purpose of making us good to God—forgiveness. Jesus did not just die, he died to do something for us. Then Jesus said to that woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” In his own

words, Jesus is giving something to the woman, giving her faith in him instead of faith in the condemning words she heard from everyone else. And by that faith in him on a cross and risen from death (so that we too might have a new life), she can have peace in her heart, in her life, because she has peace with God.]

[So Jesus on a cross is not just an end, but the means by which Jesus gives us faith in him. Jesus on a cross is a promise to us, his promising to forgive us, to make us good, to give us faith in him.]

[To make Jesus the “means” of faith, of eternal life, of righteousness, does not make Jesus second best, as if less important than the result. Jesus is also the result—faith in Jesus, eternal life with Jesus, forgiveness by Jesus. It is faith in Jesus that “God will regard and reckon as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3.21-25 and 4.5” (Augsburg Confession, Article 4). That whole article also makes Jesus a “means,” as it reads, “we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God [goal] by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake [means] our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.”]

[So, as Jesus is the means to forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life, those means are given to us for Jesus’ sake. Thus making Jesus, the means, the most important.]

[Perhaps I misread you, for in ThTh #478, there is,

[“Christ and his cross cannot just be a principle used to adorn bigger ideas. This is the core error of the teleological temptation. Proper law/gospel preaching seeks to counter the error of the teleological temptation by making sure that the law which works on our wills is always separate from the gospel

which works on our inner being to make us new. The goal of a good law/gospel preacher will always be to keep Christ front and center. By the law properly preached, God calls us to awareness of our limitations even as we are encouraged to make do the best we can for our neighbor under the world's fallen state. But in the gospel, given in its fullness, Jesus Christ becomes crucified for us in our hearing as the end and literally the death of our grief, sin, sorrow, accusations, fears, doubts, limitations, and worldly works."

[Here Jesus dies as the means of death for our grief, sin, sorrow, and so on.]

You are powerfully articulating Lutheran theology here. Wish I could be as clear. What I was primarily objecting to is Christ preached in such a way that he provides benefits other than the ones you have brilliantly outlined. All the other benefits given by modern preachers work primarily on our wills in the ways Aristotle outlined in his rhetoric. My favorite example is social justice. In most preaching Christ either makes social justice possible, or condemns the old order in a way that calls us to act. In the latter case, it is up to us then to act in a way that makes social justice possible. These kinds of preachers give a benefit of Christ that is not complete. All the benefits of Christ you have outlined are complete in themselves: they do not work on our fallen old will but, rather, they literally create a new heart and will within us. I see such benefits less as goals that Jesus was trying to get us to and more as benefits that we get from our lives being tied up together with his life by his act on the cross.

[When Jesus makes us a Promise (and his Promise is also called Gospel), he promises us we are forgiven by God, called good by God, and we have eternal life. A promise calls for trust, but trust in something that has been promised. We do not trust Jesus

on a cross and that's it. We trust Jesus on a cross to be our forgiveness. A promise is a means to give us trust in the one making the promise.]

[So maybe you are saying close to what Crossings says. It is essential that Jesus' Promise (the cross as "means") comforts us (gives us faith in him—a goal).]

Jesus dies so that we might have faith in him and not our works. That's my thesis. I was trying to illustrate the way I constantly see it smudged by the ELCA.

[We give Jesus honor and glory when we make him the means. If we don't have a reason for why Jesus is on the cross ("means"), we take away his glory, the "for his sake." If Jesus is not the means, then our problem of not having faith in God is not dealt with, and our problem of God's law, judgment, and wrath are not dealt with. If we don't mention those problems of wrong faith and God's judgment in discussing why Jesus is on the cross, then we belittle why Jesus is on the cross—to give us faith in him as the way to overcome death and God's judgment.]

[To be the means is to be the most important. The goals of faith and faith acting in love are to have Christ as our life. Jesus is not a means to something greater than he is, but the means to what he does for us, the means to be with him because he is merciful, forgiving, loving, and makes us forgiven and loved by God his Father.]

To know Christ is to know his benefits. Not our own desires for spiritual perfection, social justice, or a more "missional church." HIS benefits!

[I learned of "goal, malady, means." So I react to a different evaluation of "means." But it is good to for us preachers to make sure and to remind ourselves to make Jesus necessary, needed. That way he is the one trusted, which is your goal and

the goal of all preachers.]

**So glad for the response. It really helped me clarify my ideas.
All the best to your ministry.**

[Peace to you.]

[Timothy Hoyer]

And to you.

Matt Metevelis

VDMA

#787 An Exemplary Conversation (1)

Colleagues,

Three weeks ago we sent you [a brief essay](#) by Pr. Matt Metevelis of Las Vegas who used some interesting reflections on Aristotle's principles of rhetoric to critique poor preaching and push hard for the goal of preaching Christ. I should mention that Matt was trained at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, where he drank deeply from the wells of Gerhard Forde and the like. A week or so later we got a thoughtful response from Pr. Tim Hoyer of Jamestown, New York. Tim, a graduate of yesteryear's Seminex, had a few bones to pick with Matt, a few of them quite pointed. When we suggested that he bring them to Matt's attention before we published them here, he not only agreed, but also turned what he had sent us into the wonderfully gracious and thoughtful letter that you'll find below. A day or so later Matt responded to him in much the same spirit. We'll send you that next week, both posts coming to you, of course, with the authors'

permission.

We want you to see Tim's and Matt's exchange for two reasons. First, it's substantive. You'll profit from reading it. As Tim pushes Matt to sharpen his thinking he'll likely do the same to you; and for all we know you'll say "Aha!" yourself when next week comes and you see how Matt responded.

The second and still better reason for sharing this is its nature as a conversation between a couple of theologically adept pastors who haven't lost sight of their prior calling as brothers in Christ, strangers though they be to each other. Would that this were the norm for such exchanges. It isn't. Pastors and theologians have as much of the old flesh hanging around their necks as anybody (cf. *Large Catechism*, Sixth Petition), and it shows in the way they snap, snarl, strut, and do their best to score points on each other. More's the pity when the folks doing it are co-confessors of genuine Gospel. As if we aren't already beleaguered! Would that all of us might learn from Tim and Matt about co-confessing well, in such a way that the other is edified and built up, the Lord of both being honored not only in word, but in spirit too.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Matt Metevelis,

You and I have in common Luther Seminary, for you got a degree there and so did I. However, I attended during the summer for four years while you attended fall, winter, and spring.

Your concern for using Jesus as the final goal of preaching is what all of us preachers need to be concerned about. With great dismay I read other sermons and find Jesus is not used as the

goal of the sermon, if he is mentioned at all.

My seminary was Christ Seminary-Seminex where I had Professors Bertram and Schroeder, who are the two who taught about "Crossings." But they were taught by a preacher and professor named Richard Caemmerer, who, amazingly, was my professor for preaching classes. (He was about eighty years old when he taught me.) His outline for a sermon was "goal, malady, means." There was a goal a preacher wanted to get his listeners to. But there was a malady preventing the listeners from getting there. The means to get the listener from the malady to the goal was Jesus.

There were two goals—faith in Jesus and faith in Jesus working in love for others.

Crossings has its outline of Diagnosis/Prognosis, which is a more detailed outline of what happens in "goal, malady, means." Bertram took Caemmerer's outline and made the parts of those three steps more clear. Bertram took "malady" and made it three parts—external, internal, and eternal maladies. They were all what Caemmerer talked about, but they were not specifically described. The means is Step Four, or the first step of Prognosis, in that Jesus is the means by which our problem with God is overcome. Jesus is also the one we are given faith in (goal) and Jesus is the one who gives us love and his Spirit to deal with the situation or external problem we started with—a part of the malady.

In your [ThTh #784](#), I think you wanted Jesus to be the goal of preaching, for to use Jesus as a means to something else made Jesus only a means to an end, thus making him less important. From ThTh #784, "Preaching is the place where the crucified God comes to meet us. When the gospel is preached, God comes in the crucified Christ to dwell with the congregation. Hearing the sermon, they are reclaimed by Christ in faith. In the words of

the preacher, He is bleeding and crucified for them.”

Is it enough to say that Jesus is crucified for me? People will ask, “Why was he crucified for me?” To answer the question why is to say Jesus died to do something for me. Jesus then becomes the means to do something for us.

But to make Jesus the goal is to take away any reason for why he is the goal. Why make Jesus the goal? What good is it for me if Jesus is the goal? Yes, that is a selfish concern to ask if Jesus is any good for me, but if Jesus is not good for me, then there is no love from Jesus to all of us.

The Lutheran Confessions—the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession—say that we are to use Christ (glorify Christ, magnify Christ, honor Christ) and his death and resurrection (make Jesus the goal), and, here is the second part, use Jesus in a way that gives comfort to sinners (or consolation, as in the Summer 2013 Issue of the Crossings newsletter).

Jesus himself used himself as a means. In Luke 7, where Jesus has dinner with Simon the Pharisee and where a woman from the city, a sinner, washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses his feet, and anoints them with ointment, Jesus says to that woman, “Your sins are forgiven you.” Jesus on the cross is not just there on the cross, but is on the cross for the purpose of making us good to God—forgiveness. Jesus did not just die, he died to do something for us. Then Jesus said to that woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” In his own words, Jesus is giving something to the woman, giving her faith in him instead of faith in the condemning words she heard from everyone else. And by that faith in him on a cross and risen from death (so that we too might have a new life), she can have peace in her heart, in her life, because she has peace with God.

So Jesus on a cross is not just an end, but the means by which Jesus gives us faith in him. Jesus on a cross is a promise to us, his promising to forgive us, to make us good, to give us faith in him.

To make Jesus the “means” of faith, of eternal life, of righteousness, does not make Jesus second best, as if less important than the result. Jesus is also the result—faith in Jesus, eternal life with Jesus, forgiveness by Jesus. It is faith in Jesus that “God will regard and reckon as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3.21-25 and 4.5” (Augsburg Confession, Article 4). That whole article also makes Jesus a “means,” as it reads, “we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God [goal] by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake [means] our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.”

So, as Jesus is the means to forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life, those means are given to us for Jesus’ sake. Thus making Jesus, the means, the most important.

Perhaps I misread you, for in ThTh #784, there is,

“Christ and his cross cannot just be a principle used to adorn bigger ideas. This is the core error of the teleological temptation. Proper law/gospel preaching seeks to counter the error of the teleological temptation by making sure that the law which works on our wills is always separate from the gospel which works on our inner being to make us new. The goal of a good law/gospel preacher will always be to keep Christ front and center. By the law properly preached, God calls us to awareness of our limitations even as we are encouraged to make do the best we can for our neighbor under the world’s fallen state. But in the gospel, given in its fullness, Jesus Christ

becomes crucified for us in our hearing as the end and literally the death of our grief, sin, sorrow, accusations, fears, doubts, limitations, and worldly works."

Here Jesus dies as the means of death for our grief, sin, sorrow, and so on.

When Jesus makes us a Promise (and his Promise is also called Gospel), he promises us we are forgiven by God, called good by God, and we have eternal life. A promise calls for trust, but trust in something that has been promised. We do not trust Jesus on a cross and that's it. We trust Jesus on a cross to be our forgiveness. A promise is a means to give us trust in the one making the promise.

So maybe you are saying close to what Crossings says. It is essential that Jesus' Promise (the cross as "means") comforts us (gives us faith in him—a goal).

We give Jesus honor and glory when we make him the means. If we don't have a reason for why Jesus is on the cross ("means"), we take away his glory, the "for his sake." If Jesus is not the means, then our problem of not having faith in God is not dealt with, and our problem of God's law, judgment, and wrath are not dealt with. If we don't mention those problems of wrong faith and God's judgment in discussing why Jesus is on the cross, then we belittle why Jesus is on the cross—to give us faith in him as the way to overcome death and God's judgment.

To be the means is to be the most important. The goals of faith and faith acting in love are to have Christ as our life. Jesus is not a means to something greater than he is, but the means to what he does for us, the means to be with him because he is merciful, forgiving, loving, and makes us forgiven and loved by God his Father.

I learned of “goal, malady, means.” So I react to a different evaluation of “means.” But it is good to for us preachers to make sure and to remind ourselves to make Jesus necessary, needed. That way he is the one trusted, which is your goal and the goal of all preachers.

Peace to you.

Timothy Hoyer

#786 Kumbaya Revisited

Colleagues,

This week’s treat is intended especially for any of you who learned as I did, somewhere along the line, to despise the song “Kumbaya.” It was hot stuff in the popular culture of the ’60s, thanks to the likes of Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. In the ’70s it became a fixture in the folk masses that signaled a general itch for relief from the tedium of public worship in mainline denominations. Soon after that, some cynical wag skewered it with one of those lines that spreads like wildfire, all of us suddenly knowing it without recalling how or where we came to know it. In this case the line was a smackdown of the naïve, unserious Christian who seems to imagine that effecting peace in the world involves little more than wishing for it really, really hard. Of them it was said (assuming they existed), “they all held hands around the campfire and sang Kumbaya,” the silly song for silly people, or thus the implication; and that’s how I, for one, have regarded it ever since.

That changed last month, when the song showed up in the

liturgical prayer of some very serious people in Cape Town, South Africa, and I got to hear it. The occasion was the opening service for the Second Ordinary Meeting of the 13th Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Cape Church). Americans would call this a church assembly, or a convention, perhaps. The liturgist at the service was the Rev. Felix Meylahn, Vice Chairman of the Cape Church Council, i.e. second in rank to the bishop. Many of you will remember Pr. Meylahn. Either you heard him in person when he delivered a stunning presentation at the 2012 Crossings Conference, or else you read that presentation when we passed it along in successive Thursday Theology posts (numbers [723](#) and [724](#)) a month or so later. You'll hear echoes in the Prayer of the Church that he pulled together for the aforementioned service, drawn, he told me, from a variety of sources and tailored for the occasion.

South Africa is famous for extracting treasure from dirt. It seems to me that Pr. Meylahn did that in this prayer. And whether you agree with that assessment or not, I'm quite certain you won't repeat the mistake of dismissing the song as nothing more than a bit of vacuous fluff.

This being technically a Fourth of July post, however late it may be in getting to you, let me add the wish that those of us who serve Christ in the U.S. might be as earnest and thoughtful about praying for the well-being of the country we belong to as our South African counterparts seem to be.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Prayer of the Church at the opening liturgy of a meeting of the Cape Church Synod, June 7, 2013—

The bidding prayer today is based on the well-known song "Kum ba yah," which means, "Come by here," or better, "Be present Lord, in our trouble." We can sing the song between the prayer sections as a responsory to the prayers. We start with, "Someone's crying, Lord, Kum ba yah," and then I'll announce the next phrase as we come to it.

"Someone's crying, Lord, Kum ba yah"

Someone is crying Lord, somewhere. Some is millions, somewhere is many places. There are tears of suffering. There are tears of weakness and disappointment, there are tears of strength and resistance, there are tears of the rich and the tears of the poor. Someone is crying Lord, redeem the times.

"Someone's dying, Lord, Kum ba yah"

Some are dying of hunger and thirst, someone's dying because somebody else is enjoying too many unnecessary and superfluous things. Someone is dying because people go on exploiting one another. Some are dying because there are structures and systems which crush the poor and alienate people from one another. Some are dying because there are some in power that appoint incompetent people to positions of authority and responsibility. Someone's dying, Lord, because we are still not prepared to stand up for the truth, to be witnesses for justice and proper government. Someone's dying, Lord, be with us in our trouble.

"Someone's shouting Lord, Kum ba yah"

Someone's shouting out loudly and clearly. Someone has found the courage to stand up against the injustice of our times. Someone is shouting out, offering their very existence in love and anger to fight the death that surrounds us, to wrestle with the evils with which we crucify each other. Someone's shouting, Lord, to call us all to responsibility before You, reminding us that we are accountable to you for our lives and deeds. Someone's

shouting Lord, sustain these shouting voices and redeem our times.

“Someone’s praying Lord, Kum ba yah”

Someone’s praying Lord. We are praying in tears and anger, in frustration and weakness, in strength and endurance. We are shouting and wrestling, as Jacob wrestled with the angel and was touched, and was marked and became a blessing. So we are praying, Lord, that you would forgive us our sins, our sins of commission and our sins of omission, the things we did, and the things we failed to do. Before you we are sinners and all we can do is ask for your mercy. Someone’s praying Lord, be present in our troubles with your forgiveness and mercy.

“Someone’s praising, Lord, Kum ba yah”

Someone’s praising, Lord, praising you for your goodness, thanking you for your kindness and mercy in Jesus Christ. In Him you have let us know where you want us to be. Help us to be there during this coming week and be with us, touch us, mark us, bless us and let us be a blessing, let your power be present in our weakness. Someone’s praising, Lord, redeem our times and set us free. Amen

#785 A Life and Ministry Shaped by the Good Shepherd

We’re happy to share with you this week a sermon we received recently from Bishop Marcus C. Lohrmann. Marcus is bishop of the ELCA’s Northwestern Ohio Synod, and his writing has appeared numerous times in this space—most recently in [Thursday Theology](#)

[#773](#).

Marcus preached this sermon last month, at the funeral of one of his mentors, the Rev. Dr. Arthur H. Strege, who founded the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Hazelwood, Missouri, in the late 1950's. In an e-mail, Marcus explains,

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd was the congregation where I did "field work" in my first two years of seminary (1972-74). It so happened that I attended the [1973] New Orleans Convention where the Concordia Seminary Faculty Majority was condemned as "holding doctrine not to be tolerated in the church of God." In the presence of my personal distress, Pastor Strege wrote me a letter in which he pointed out that what happened in New Orleans was not finally what the church was about, that I had gifts for ministry, and should pursue developing them. As I finished a two-year internship with Pastor Harry Huxhold, Our Redeemer, Indianapolis, Pastor Strege wrote me a letter inviting me to work on a contract basis in youth ministry, evangelism, and stewardship while I finished coursework at Seminex. In the Spring of 1977, he asked me if I would be open to being called as Assistant Pastor. The congregation, still a member of the LC-MS, then voted to call me as pastor even though I was "an uncertified Seminex grad." Several years later Pastor Strege and Good Shepherd voted to leave the LC-MS and to join the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America. I would serve at Good Shepherd until the summer of 1989....This pastor was one who "blessed" me and, by word and example, taught me much about what it is to be a shepherd fashioned by "The Good Shepherd."

As you'll see, Marcus's sermon delves more deeply into the role that the Good Shepherd played in Pastor Strege's life and ministry.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team.

A Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the Funeral of the Rev. Dr. Arthur H. Strege

The Text: Gospel of St. John, the 10th and 11th chapters.

Theme: A Life and Ministry Shaped by the Good Shepherd

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Hazelwood, Missouri

May 4, 2013

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In my early days as a pastor, Pastor Strege—like you, I did not call him anything other than Pastor Strege until I left ministry at Good Shepherd—said to me, “Marcus, you need to get more stories into your sermons, and not so much theology.” And I replied, “Pastor Strege, I haven’t lived long enough to know any stories!”

Today, we have stories. I am so grateful to the family for sharing some of those stories. Those stories reflect sides of Pastor Strege that we didn’t always see. I had the privilege of getting in on some of them. It was in the Strege household that I learned to enjoy syrup over grilled cheese sandwiches. You kind of grow into it! We have stories. Last evening at the funeral home there were lots of stories being told, lots of memories—enhanced by video, enhanced by photographs—stories by the hundred about Dad, Grandpa, Pastor, and friend. Since I learned about his death, I have rehearsed many stories in my own mind. This is a time when we recall with deep gratitude, and

with some tears, the privilege of being among those who were shaped by this man's faith and life. Today I have deep gratitude for him and, in my case, also for this dear congregation that he so much loved.

As those stories are being told there is a common theme that surfaces over and over again. That theme would be the story of the Good Shepherd—a story that captivated, I'll go to his baptismal name, Arthur, when he and his brother, Paul, were but babies and claimed in the baptismal water—a story in which they were nurtured in their household by their pastor father, who died when they were much too young with the result that the family had to struggle to make it as a family. But this is a story that claimed them and that possessed them, so much so that both of them could not do otherwise than to become “shepherds” modeled after that Good Shepherd. Shaped by that story brother Art entered the seminary. Would you believe it, his doctoral work was in the area of the New Testament, and specifically on the Gospel of John? You wonder from where the theme of the Good Shepherd comes? It comes from the Gospel of John.

Pastor Strege's doctoral thesis was on the idea of glory in the Gospel of John. What he learned was that the understanding of glory has everything to do with the Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for his flock.” This was the story around which he and Lucy wrapped their life. When I think of Pastor Strege I think of one who loved his wife and his family deeply and profoundly. But he also loved the people of God who were a part of this congregation. He himself knew what it meant to live life under the forgiveness of sins. Over the years I heard him urge you repent. The urging was done with authority, because there is a lot at stake. But we get to repent because the voice of this Good Shepherd says this is “the way to have life and to have it in abundance.” To have this One is to have everything. Not to have this One, not to have the One who laid down his life for

his sheep, is to have nothing at all. This is the story that Pastor Strege used to shape his life and his ministry. He was one who knew the voice of the Good Shepherd, one who knew the gift of the forgiveness of sins. Who wouldn't know that, as a husband and as a father and as a pastor? He knew that he lived and served "by the forgiveness of sins," and so he commended that word to those whom he was called to serve. This is one whose story was wrapped around the story of the Good Shepherd.

Did you know that the word "pastor" is linked to the word "shepherd?" Pastor Strege was one whose shepherding was modeled after the Good Shepherd. Here again you can tell the stories. The stories in which you sat in those pews and you heard that good news proclaimed to you again. In his sermons he would echo the question Jesus asked of Mary and Martha when he referred to himself as "the resurrection and the life." The question was and is, "Do you believe this?" By the power of the Holy Spirit you were enabled to trust yourself to that word again. Pastor Strege was with you as you and your kids had water splashed over them, joining them to Jesus' death and resurrection. I like the line that "the only death we should be afraid of is the death we don't need to be afraid of because Jesus has gone there ahead of us." Pastor Strege was one who knew what it was to seek out the lost. No one cared more deeply about you than your own pastor, who ached for you in your brokenness, who ached for you in your sorrows, who delighted with you in your joys, who was grateful to be your pastor.

But he was one who in the course of his ministry also would learn what it means to trust that word of promise when everything else seems to be not a word to be trusted, when everything else would invite disbelief. I recall him telling me the story of the death of a child. Some of you will know that story better than I. He said "I'll never forget going there with that family and doing that funeral and then coming home to my

own daughter's embrace." He ached for you in your sorrows, he rejoiced with you in your joys.

He was one who knew and had an ear attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd even when other voices would bid him to listen to something else. He was one who understood that all the stories of scripture were told, to use the words of the Gospel of John, "in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that believing you may have life in his name." That's the story that holds us together—there is none other. He trusted himself to that story no matter the cost. That is what it means to be caught up by the One who is the Good Shepherd. He loved you. He cared for you. He prayed for you. He chewed on his fingers because of you. He got acid in the belly because of you. But he knew that was his calling, because he was one who was called and sent by the Good Shepherd.

Then came other hard days. It was an incredible occasion—I might call it a "God incident"—when my wife Heidi and I were visiting in St. Louis when he and Lucy were going to the doctor to inquire concerning Lucy's illness. I arrived at his home right as they returned from the doctor's office. He shared with me Lucy's diagnosis of Alzheimer's. He said "Now we'll see what a good and gracious Lord is going to do with us." You knew Pastor Strege as a person of strength. One of you once told me, "When Pastor Strege came into the room when I was in the hospital, it was like God was there." It was because he was strong—strong in person and strong in faith. He evoked the words of promise. The Holy Spirit used him to persuade faith. But here is the other side of faith: it keeps quenching anything in us that would trust in ourselves. In the Gospel of John there is this fascinating story when Jesus says to Peter, who had denied him three times, "Peter, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Then Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my sheep, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." Jesus continues

with these haunting words: "When you were young you would go where you want to go, but when you are old you will be bound and taken where you do not want to go." I suspect that in those latter years, in some of that pain, Art and Lucy were taken to places they did not want to go—places which might have seemed to be places of deep darkness. But there was another One they knew who had gone to these dark places before them, another One who had prayed, "Father, if it be your will let this cup pass from me; but, not my will but yours be done." There would be another shepherd, namely, St. Paul, who would say, "I have learned that in my weakness Christ strengthens me." When we have nothing to offer, no strength, no authority, what we trust again is the voice of the Good Shepherd who says, "I know my own. I am the Good Shepherd and I know my own and they hear my voice, and no one is going to snatch them from my grasp—not the vulnerabilities of aging, not Alzheimer's, not a brain tumor, no, none of that will snatch you from my grasp."

The word that he commended to you is the word in weakness that he needed to trust.

That word 'glory' in the Gospel of John points to the gracious manifestation of God in the word made flesh in Jesus. John reminds us of how God's glory will be revealed in Jesus' words: "I when I am lifted up on the cross I will draw all people to myself." This glory is revealed in Jesus' resurrection and the ascension, in his gift of peace, in the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, and in the sending of his disciples then and now. And in these latter days the glory of God was revealed to Art through this community—in the community of Christ that echoed back to him the words that he had offered to you, the words of the glory of God manifested again in weakness: "Yes. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my

enemies. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

In a few moments we get to gather at the Table. We get to celebrate the One whose promise is that those who receive that gift of bread will not perish. Glory manifested one more time. That’s the glory that sends us out today as people who still hear the voice of our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This shepherd, our brother, Art, has completed his journey, has entered that gift of eternal rest for which we praise God with all our hearts. But guess what: you are not there yet, and neither am I. Your task is to embody in your person that word of the Good Shepherd. You and I are still being sent out to share the good news of this One who laid down his life for us and for the world. The risen Lord still blesses us, in the midst of all those things that make us fearful, with the gift of his peace, the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, the gift of forgiveness, and the ability to offer that to others. He still sends us out until we receive also that final rest, that final glory with Art and Lucy, with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Amen.