

# **#774            “Full            Communion” Relationships and the Mission of Christ, Part 2**

This week we bring you the second half Bishop Marcus C. Lohrmann’s “Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward,” which he presented earlier this year in an ecumenical lecture series at Lourdes University in Sylvania, Ohio. As you’ll recall from [last week](#), the first half of Marcus’s lecture presents the rationale behind the ELCA’s various “full communion” agreements. In this second half, he reflects on the experiences of having lived and worked with those agreements, and he discusses both the challenges they pose and the benefits they offer.

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

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## **Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward**

**Lourdes University, Sylvania, Ohio**

**February 24, 2013**

**[Part 2]**

### **D. Some Gifts Received Through Full Communion Relationships**

The ELCA has now had over fifteen years of experience with full communion relationships. What are some of the gifts that have been received through these relationships? Chief among them is the growing understanding that by the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit we know

ourselves to be one. What defines us is that our identity is deeply linked to the God who in Christ Jesus claims us in baptismal water and feeds us with the Bread of Life (John 6). That trumps all that would divide us, including sin, death, and the power of the devil. Many of us historically have defined ourselves by our denomination. I have increasingly referred to myself as a Lutheran Christian as a way of pointing to the more profound identity. We experienced that more profound identity several years ago when United Methodist Bishop Bruce Ough preached a powerful sermon at a Eucharist Service for our Synod Assembly.

These relationships provide an occasion for joy for marriages, families, and friends that have been divided among denominations now in full communion relationships. In the past we often would speak of being converted from one denomination to another. The commonly accepted inference was that to leave one denomination for another risked betrayal of our faith and the heritage of our family. Some days ago I talked with an elderly couple, recently married, who spoke about how their individual faiths have been enriched through their experiences with the other's Christian faith tradition. "I'm learning to talk about Jesus," the Lutheran confessed with a laugh.

Through these relationships, we have developed a growing awareness of and appreciation for what has shaped the faith, life, and witness of the other. One of our retired pastors who has been serving an Episcopalian parish commented, "God really does have a sense of humor. I was an outspoken opponent of the full communion relationship with the Episcopalian church. Now I am serving one. And what a gift this has been for me." Recently I attended Sylvania United Church of Christ for Lutheran church historian Martin Marty's presentations. During the course of my weekend at that church I learned that one of the predecessor churches of the UCC was among the first to speak out again

slavery. I did not know that, although I did know that the UCC and its predecessor bodies have a long tradition of seeking to make the link between one's confession of faith and how that impacts matters of justice. We are the body of Christ. We need each other and the distinctive gifts we bring to the whole for the sake of Christ's mission in the world.

Full communion relationships insist that we move together in conversation in the face of potential disagreement rather than cutting off the other. Full communion relationships establish and understand the ongoing role of mutual affirmation and admonition. It is no secret that Christians in this country and in our denominations have struggled mightily with matters of sexuality. The ELCA's full communion partners have had differing perspectives on this matter. In 2010, the Reformed Church in America invited the ELCA, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Church of Christ, partners in the Formula of Agreement—along with the Christian Reformed Church, the Disciples of Christ and the Moravians—"to engage in a consultation on the interpretation and use of Scripture in moral discernment and ethical decision-making." Papers have now been compiled that explore the following topics: "Jesus is Lord"; "Scripture and Decision-Making in the Church"; and "Practices for Moral Discernment in Christian Community."

Attentiveness to other Christian traditions can deepen a growing awareness of our own tradition. Several years ago, the Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, former General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, provided leadership for a retreat for Ohio Council of Churches denominational leaders. He commented that ecumenical conversations require the most substantial understanding of our own traditions. The full communion relationships allow us, in conversation with those we are getting to know better, to know our own tradition better, warts and all.

The full communion relationships enable us to more naturally share gifts with each other. The Northwestern Ohio Synod has used the Rev. John Edgar, a former United Methodist executive and now pastor at Church of All People in Columbus, as a resource for our urban parishes who seek to have vital word and sacrament ministries that also connect with the communities of which they are a part. Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus hosts Bexley Hall, a seminary of the Episcopal Church, as they both prepare leaders for Christ's church. Imagine how the lives of seminarians are enriched through those relationships. Over the years the staff of the Northwestern Ohio Synod has met with the staffs of the Episcopalian Diocese and Western Conference of the United Methodist Church. Picture how those emerging relationship pave the way for greater collaboration for the sake of God's mission in this territory.

Most of the counties in Northwestern Ohio are in numerical decline, with congregations in many instances reflecting that decline. Full communion relationships allow us to have conversations concerning how we might better collaborate for the sake of word and sacrament communities of faith. For example, for about five years Pastor Mike Wiechers has served two parishes, one ELCA and one Episcopalian, in Port Clinton. Both congregations rejoice in the relationship. We presently are in conversation with full communion partners concerning shared ministry in other communities. I suspect that such contexts will multiply in the next years.

It is not hard to come up with more examples of the gifts received through full communion relationships. Participants in this gathering surely could provide more stories and illustrations.

E. Some of the Risks and Challenges of Full Communion Relationships

Are there risks and challenges related to full communion relationships? I think there are. One is the possibility that participants become theologically indifferent. Many applaud full communion relationships simply because they like it when people work together. Togetherness for its own sake is the ultimate goal. I understand the appeal. You have heard the statements celebrating togetherness: "There are many paths to the grist mill." "We are all heading for the same place so we might as well work together." Then there is the oft quoted, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." Full communion relationships could be perceived by some as fostering such thinking. When that takes place, it is a loss. Theology and doctrine do matter. I like the definition of doctrine that insists, "Doctrine is what must be said in order for the gospel to be heard." My hope and prayer is that full communion relationships foster such trust that we can explore the deepest truths of the Christian faith in order that the gospel may be heard for the sake of Christ's mission to the world.

One challenge is that we fail to maximize the gift of these relationships. This is hard work. Denominational and congregational leaders are often busy with our own "stuff." The principal of homogeneity too often shapes our lives. We are more comfortable with those with whom we have a shared history. The matter of tending to demonstrable unity in Christ in order that the world might believe gets lost in our trap of denominational self-preoccupation.

Another risk is that full communion relationships can become an excuse for adopting survival tactics instead of wrestling with the question concerning the ways in which our relationships can enable us to be signs of and participants in God's in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus. Imagine a Lutheran congregation and a United Methodist congregation that are considering forming a shared ministry because numbers and income are down. Perhaps the

congregations can no longer afford a pastor and the supporting of two buildings. Consider the questions, is this only about survival of the sacred territory of these buildings or is it about faithful mission? How do we raise that question? How do we discern the answers? But if in the end it is only about survival, then maybe, at least in some respects, something needs to die. There is Biblical precedent for such a view. Referring to his own death and resurrection, our Lord declares, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat first falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

It is also possible that full communion relationships and the sense of renewed strength that may come from those relationships may diminish the perceived necessity of addressing critical issues that are facing the church and its witness to Christ. All of us can name those issues. My list of those issues would include the reported negative perception of the church that leads the unchurched to dismiss it as judgmental and hypocritical; the inability of many of our churches to connect with young people in the face of other, "more attractive" alternatives; our inattentiveness to Christians of other traditions often not involved in our dialogues; our struggle with articulating a "theology of the cross" to a mainline Christian culture that has opted for what Kenda Creasy Dean in her book, *Almost Christian*, calls "moralistic therapeutic deism"; the inclination of many of our churches to function more as a club than as signs of and participants in God's in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus; our inability to nurture the Christian faith as reflected in the growing ignorance of Scripture even among those who identify with our congregations. We have major work to do with respect to knowing how to be intelligible to the culture while also conveying the scandalous good news of Jesus Christ. It would be a missed opportunity, if not a tragedy, were

our ecumenical dialogues and full communion relationships to fail to address these matters as well.

## F. A Way Forward

The title of this presentation is "Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward." Perhaps the risk in the title is that it might suggest that if only we do the proper work, we can accomplish the unity of the church. At last fall's meeting of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, we had the privilege of receiving a presentation by Bishop Denis Madden, chair of the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. As he concluded his address he commented, "2017 is the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Should we not be doing something together to mark this important occasion and to point the way toward unity?" Then he continued:

*John Borelli in an America magazine article entitled "In the Beginning: How the Work of Christian Unity Got Started" sites an episode that took place in the Vatican on December 2, 1960. Doctor Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had a meeting with Pope John XXIII. The Holy Father read from an address in which he enthusiastically referred to that time when other Christians could return to Mother Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury courteously and with deference corrected His Holiness: "Not return....None of us can go backwards. We are looking forward, until in God's good time, when our two courses approximate and meet." The pope pondered for a moment and then said, "You are right."*

Madden continued:

*Let me thank you again my brothers and sisters for your kind hospitality today. It is wonderful to be with you. Let me encourage you in your work of Christian Unity. We know that*

*Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. We need to rely on this guidance always. Despite our difficulties and occasional discouragements, there is more that unites us than divides us, so let us continue in faith to work that “all may be one.”*

I would already identify the “more that unites us” as the Incarnate One who went the way of the cross and empty tomb for us and for our salvation. As we are about this holy work of unity, we know our crucified and risen Lord prays for us, “...that we may be one...that the world may believe.” By the power of the Holy Spirit, God even now draws us together through this One who has been lifted up for the life of the world. And so we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Presented by:

Marcus C. Lohrmann

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## **#773            “Full            Communion” Relationships and the Mission of Christ**

Colleagues,

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of the Person who, among so much else, offered up the magisterial prayer of John 17. In his honor we choose this week to pass along some reflections by a Lutheran bishop who takes both the Person and the prayer with all the gravity that his Easter calls for.



Marcus C. Lohrmann has led the ELCA's Northwestern Ohio Synod for almost fifteen years. Those of us who know Marcus in other capacities will regard that synod's congregations and pastors with holy envy, if there is such a thing. As Luther puts it in his great Easter hymn, "Christ alone our souls will feed / He is our meat and drink indeed"; and if any ELCA bishop has gone to inordinate pains to ensure that this food, and no other, gets served within his or her jurisdiction, it will have been Marcus.

Early in Lent Marcus presented an installment in an ecumenical lecture series hosted by Lourdes University in Sylvania, Ohio, a suburb of Toledo. He was kind enough to send us a copy of his remarks, with permission to send it along to all of you. And so we do, in two installments, the first of which reviews the rationale behind the several "Full Communion" agreements that the ELCA has entered into during the years of his episcopal ministry. Next week's sequel will offer reflections on the experience of having lived and worked with them for a decade or more. Watch as you read for the way Marcus anchors his reflections in the word and will of Christ, especially as it emerges in the prayer of John 17.

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

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## **Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward**

**Lourdes University, Sylvania, Ohio**

**February 24, 2013**

"Remember your Church, O Lord; save it from all evil, and complete it in your love. And gather it from the four winds into your kingdom, which you prepared for it. For yours is the power

and the glory forever" (Didache 10:5).

As I begin this presentation, I want to express my gratitude to this University and to the Sisters of St. Francis Theological Studies Department who offer this Ecumenical Lecture Series in cooperation with Toledo Area Ministries and the Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Commission. This series says much about your desire to tend to the holy work of the church's unity in Christ. At this significant time in the life of the Christian church, I include in my prayers the Roman Catholic Church as a new pope is selected and this university as you welcome Dr. David Livingston as your new president.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) entered into full communion relationships with the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ in 1997, the Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church in 1999, and the United Methodist Church in 2009. During the course of this presentation, I briefly will review the foundation for these relationships, the gifts and challenges received through these relationships, and why these relationships provide an ecumenical way forward.

#### A. Beginning with Thanksgiving and Yearning

As I begin this presentation, I do so with thanksgiving to God for the growing realization among Christians of the unity given to us in Christ Jesus by virtue of being joined to Jesus' death and resurrection in the waters of baptism. We realize that to "get Jesus" is to get the whole company of Jesus' friends. We have not always wanted to recognize that. Those of you who are my age or older, easily recall times when we viewed other Christians with suspicion. We thought we knew what they believed and how those beliefs betrayed the Gospel. Within my own extended Lutheran family, we could not commune with other family members of another Lutheran denomination and were not sure that

we could pray with them. We could spend the rest of the day recalling such stories. But we won't.

Rather we begin by praising the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ by whose Spirit we are able to discern the body of Christ in other Christians. As a Lutheran Christian I praise God for our full communion relationships. And, much more: the congregations of our communities are working together, building Habitat Homes, feeding the neighborhood, tending the needs of the community. Toledo Area Ministries is one of many examples of that. But, even more, we often come together in worship to share our identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. We share in Thanksgiving Services, Holy Week Services, and we have learned to pray for one another. How precious it has been for me as Bishop of the Northwestern Ohio Synod for the past fifteen years to participate in worship with your bishops together with Lutheran and Roman Catholic and other brothers and sisters in Christ. I thank God for the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification received in October, 1999 by the Catholic Church and member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. I thank God for the Covenant between the Northwestern Ohio Synod and the Toledo Diocese signed in 2001. I am grateful for the recent agreement between the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee of the U.S Catholic Conference and the ELCA to begin working on a document, "Declaration on the Way" that in recognition of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation would include noting important areas of agreement. Thanks be to God that we could spend the rest of the afternoon recalling the manner in which we have learned more about what it means to be the body of Christ together. But we won't. However, let those memories provide a doxological framework for this conversation. Indeed, as the hymn declares, "The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Her Lord."

But accompanying this thanksgiving, at least for some of us and

perhaps for all of us gathered in this space, is a yearning. The yearning is that we might more fully realize the unity for which our Lord prays as we gather at the Table of our Lord. In that meal, we come in our brokenness to receive the gift of him who was broken for us. In that meal, we experience reconciliation as we hear the words, "My body broken for you; my blood poured out for you." In that meal we learn what it is to be gathered into the Holy Communion as we are knit together in Christ by the Holy Spirit. In that meal we learn again what it means to be formed into the body of Christ for the sake of the world. In that meal as we catch a glimpse, a foretaste of the kingdom of God, we are pointed to its realization, to its fulfillment.

Two experiences come to mind. The first is the experience of visiting Gethsemani Abbey and spending a week with the monks in the hours of prayer. Yes, I got up in the middle of the night. But then I had the experience of sorrow as I respected the request, as a non-Roman Catholic, not participate in the Lord's Supper even as I was encouraged to pray for the unity of the church. The second grows out of one of the most delightful, joy-filled experiences as bishop, namely, participating with Bishop Blair to provide leadership for an ecumenical journey with forty-five Lutherans and Roman Catholics to Wittenberg and Rome. The Roman Catholics on the trip commented that in Germany they learned that, contrary to public opinion, Lutherans also have saints and relics. Every day we joined for evening prayer, recalling our baptism into Christ, singing the Magnificat. But in the mornings, we would have our separate celebrations of the Eucharist. How profound it was that one morning we gathered at a hotel in Berlin, with windows overlooking the former site of the Berlin wall, Lutherans and Roman Catholics in adjacent rooms, singing the liturgy of the Eucharist but separated by a thin wall. I understand the rationale for such separation. I really do. But what I experienced was a holy yearning. You too have

your places of holy yearning.

#### B. A Yearning That Goes Back To Our Lord Jesus... and Before

The promise given to Abraham and Sarah was that "...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3b). The prophets could speak of that time when "...the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isaiah 60:2b-3). The Gospel of John speaks of the Word made Flesh, who "...became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son" (John 1:14). This Word made flesh will declare the odd way in which God will be glorified as Jesus later declares, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth (ed. think 'death and resurrection'), will draw all people to myself." This glorified One does not want his followers to mess things up and so he prays also for them prior to his "lifting up": "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have love me" (John 17:22-23). Earlier he will pray, "...so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (17:21).

This "yearning" both expresses the reality (i.e. beloved in Christ) and the purpose, that is, for the sake of God's mission (i.e. that the world might believe). This yearning will be echoed by the Holy Writer who reminds an early church prone to division, "I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the body of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). You already know the grounding for such evangelical persuasion: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above

all and through all and in all" (4:4-6). A holy yearning, indeed!

### C. An Introduction to a Lutheran Vision for Ecumenism

In 1990, early in its formation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted the statement, "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." I will quote from that document in order that you might understand something of this church's rationale for full communion relationships. The following briefly summarizes the contribution of the Lutheran Confessions with respect to this discussion:

The Lutheran Confessions were the products of an effort at evangelical reform, which, contrary to its intention, resulted in divisions within the Western church. As evangelical writings, they stress justification by grace through faith alone as the criterion for judging all church doctrine and life. As catholic writings, they assert that the gospel is essential to the church for being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Their evangelical and catholic aspects are complementary, not contradictory. When a particular misinterpretation of the catholic tradition conflicts with the gospel, the classic Lutheran confessional choice was and remains for the gospel. They are concerned for the oneness of Christ's church under the gospel, the preservation of the true catholic heritage, and the renewal of the church as a whole. That the Confessions have such concerns can be seen from the following points:

1. They always point to Scripture, with its stress on teaching the truth of the gospel—which they see as the only sufficient basis for Christian unity—as normative. Because of this evangelical stress they also point to Scripture's confession of one Lord and one church as basic for understanding Christian unity.
2. They begin with the ancient ecumenical creeds—Apostles',

Nicene, and Athanasian—as “the three chief symbols.” Lutherans always have a common basis with those who share these creeds and the Bible.

3. They draw upon the theological reflection of the early church leaders in East and West, and thus share a resource with those who also know and honor the theologians of the patristic era.
4. While many of the Lutheran Confessions were hammered out in the struggles of the sixteenth century and dwell on the differences with the Roman Catholics, the Reformed, the Anabaptists, and even some Lutherans, they also contained, whether specifically noted or not, many points of basic agreement with such groups.
5. The primary Lutheran confessional document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, claims to be a fully catholic as well as an evangelical expression of Christian faith. Part I, which lists the chief articles of faith, states that the Confession is grounded clearly in Scripture and does not depart from the universal Christian [that is, catholic] church. The confessors at Augsburg asked only for freedom to preach and worship in accordance with the Gospel. They were willing, upon recognition of the legitimacy of these reforms, to remain in fellowship with those who did not share every theological formulation or reforming practice [Augsburg Confession, Preface, Article XV, Article XXVIII and Conclusion]. It is in this historical context that Article VII is to be understood: “for the true unity of the church it is enough (*satis est*) to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” The confessors allowed for diversity of opinion and discussion of many other matters (see Smalcald Articles, Part III, introduction).

Here it is important to note that when the confessors speak of the “teaching of the Gospel” the chief concern is that the

church in its proclamation, life and witness make use of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord Jesus so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, troubled consciences are consoled, sins are forgiven, and Christ's righteousness becomes ours. When that good news is spoken, when baptism and Eucharist deliver it and when by the Holy Spirit such good news is received in faith, there is the church.

With that Lutheran confessional understanding, the predecessor church bodies of the ELCA were very much a part of the ecumenical conversations that multiplied in the mid-twentieth century. Lutherans made up the largest confessional group that was a part of the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Ecumenical dialogues flourished in the next years. There was a new impetus for ecumenical dialogue with the entry of the Roman Catholic Church ratified by the Second Vatican Council. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans began or continued dialogues with Reformed and Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists, Orthodox, Baptists, and conservative evangelicals.

In 1983, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches relayed to member churches for their response and reception the document, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry." This document would provide another impetus for ecumenical understanding for the predecessor bodies of the ELCA and other Christian churches.

In 1984, the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation "...declared themselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship" and the churches of the federation "...declared themselves to be a communion of churches." The 1984 Assembly then adopted a statement on unity that, I believe, has had implications for the full communion relationships that have developed with other traditions. It states,



*The true unity of the church, which is the unity of the body of Christ and participates in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is given in and through proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This unity is expressed as a communion in the common and, at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a communion in Holy Baptism and in the eucharistic meal, a communion in which the ministries exercised are recognized by all as expressions of the ministry instituted by Christ in his church. It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity. It is a committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and to act in common. The diversity present in this communion rises out of the differing cultural and ethnic contexts in which the one church of Christ lives out its mission and out of the number of church traditions in which the apostolic faith has been maintained, transmitted, and lived throughout the centuries. In recognizing these diversities as expressions of the one apostolic faith and the one catholic church, traditions are changed, antagonisms overcome, and mutual condemnations lifted. The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformity within the one body of Christ.*

*This communion lives out its unity in confessing the one apostolic faith. It assembles in worship and in intercession for all people. It is active in common witness to Jesus Christ; in advocacy for the weak, poor, and oppressed; and in striving for peace, justice, and freedom. It is ordered in all its components in conciliar structures and actions. It is in need of constant renewal and is at the same time, a foretaste of that communion, which the Lord will at the end of time bring about in his kingdom.*

The Vision Statement goes on to describe the manner in which the

Lutheran tradition is open to critique:

*Even more boldly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America takes its Lutheran theological heritage so seriously that it believes God's word of justification excludes the patterns of ecclesiastical self-justification, which have resulted from the polemical heritage of the sixteenth century. The first word, which the Church speaks ecumenically, may well be a word of self-criticism, a word against itself, because we are called to be seekers of a truth that is larger than all of us and that condemns our parochialism, imperialism, and self-preoccupation. If it can speak such a word of self-criticism, the Church will be free to reject a triumphalist and magisterial understanding of itself and cultivate instead an understanding of itself as a community of mission and witness that seeks to be serviceable to the in-breaking of the reign of God.*

I shared a draft of this paper with my nephew, Martin Lohrmann, who is a reformation scholar in his own right. He offered the following comment: "It crossed my mind while reading your paper that Lutherans view not only individuals as "simul iustus et peccator" but that we also view the visible church that way. Born into sin, we and our institutions (including the church) are never free of sin in this life. At the same time, created by the call of God, the church on earth is also the place of divine grace and will never be otherwise." He adds, "That gets to your point about Christian unity being a gift (an 'already') and a call to live into (a 'not yet')."

As it considers the development of ecumenical relationships, the Ecumenical Vision statement continues:

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in the ecumenical movement, because of its desire for Christian unity. It seeks full communion as its goal, i.e.,*

*the fullest or most complete actualization of unity possible before the parousia with all those churches that confess the Triune God. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, both as a church and as a member of the wider communion of churches in the Lutheran World Federation, seeks to reach this goal, in order to express the unity of the Church and to carry out better the mission of the Church in proclamation and action.*

What follows now is a definition of “full communion”:

*Full communion, a gift from God, is founded on faith in Jesus Christ. It is a commitment to truth in love and a witness to God’s liberation and reconciliation. Full communion is visible and sacramental. It includes all that Lutherans have meant by “pulpit and altar fellowship,” but goes beyond that historical formulation because of the obligatory mission given by the gospel. Full communion is obviously a goal toward which divided churches, under God’s Spirit, are striving, but which has not been reached. It points to the complete communion and unity of all Christians that will come with the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the parousia of Christ, the Lord. It is also a goal in need of continuing definition. It is rooted in agreement on essentials and allows diversity in nonessentials. In most cases, however, the churches will not be able to move directly from their disunity to a full expression of their God-given unity, but can expect to experience a movement from disunity to unity that may include one or more of the following stages of relationships.*

1. Ecumenical Cooperation
2. Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues.
3. Preliminary Recognition. Here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can be involved on a church-to-church basis in Eucharistic sharing and cooperation, without

exchangeability of ministers.

4. Full Communion. At this stage the goal of the involvement of this church in the ecumenical movement is fully attained. Here the question of the shape and form of full communion needs to be addressed and answered practically in terms of what will best further the mission of the Church in individual cases, consistent with the Lutheran understanding of the basis of the unity of the Church in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.

The Vision Statement continues by offering a description of full communion relationships:

*For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the characteristics of full communion are theological and missiological implications of the gospel that allow variety and flexibility. These characteristics stress that the Church act ecumenically for the sake of the world, not for itself alone. They will include at least the following, some of which exist at earlier stages:*

1. a common confessing of the Christian faith;
2. a mutual recognition of Baptism and a sharing of the Lord's Supper, allowing for joint worship and an exchangeability of members;
3. a mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers to the service of all members of churches in full communion, subject only but always to the disciplinary regulations of the other churches;
4. a common commitment to evangelism, witness, and service;
5. a means of common decision making on critical common issues of faith and life;
6. a mutual lifting of any condemnations that exist between churches.

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# **#772 Where is Jesus in the “Talents” Parables? An Angle on the Passion**

Colleagues,

By rights all Holy Week sermons will be ready to go by the time you get this. And that's too bad either for you or for the preacher you like to bless with the latest stuff from Thursday Theology. Tonight's post showed up in our editors' mailbox about five days ago. It came from Pr. Ted Schroeder, who must be so habituated by now to being identified as Ed's younger brother that he won't mind too much when we do that here. I wish we could have gotten this to you two weeks ago. You'll understand why when you read it. If nothing else, tuck it away for reference next year when the preps for passion preaching are still in the early thinking stages.

God grant fresh faith and insight to saints in Christ the world o'er the next few days.

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

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## **The Parables of the Talents and the Stewards in Luke 19 and Matthew 25**

## **Ted Schroeder, 2013**

June 1988 – I was in San Jose, Costa Rica, with people from Europe, Australia, and North America and South America. We had been visiting base communities in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Now in Costa Rica we were debriefing. An Anglican from Australia led morning devotions. Someone read Luke 19:11-28. Then Fr. Donald Carrington stood up to preach. He said something like, “I’ve spent most of my ministry among Aborigines in northern Australia. When they read this story of the nobleman who had become a king, they say, ‘Now there is one bad bloke.’” (Shortest sermon I’ve ever heard.) There was a stir throughout the group. We got it; this was not a parable about “God is sovereign” and “use your talents.” Jesus was teaching about speaking truth to power and paying the price for doing so, just as the base communities we visited were doing—both speaking out and paying the price.

In Luke this parable occurs just before Jesus enters Jerusalem (Palm Sunday). Luke wrote that Jesus decides to tell this story because he perceives that his followers thought that the “reign of God was about to happen immediately.” This story should be front and center as we enter Paschtide, helping the Church journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross.

The Matthew 25 version of this story is brief: An unnamed man is going on a journey. Departing, he entrusts his business to three servants. Upon his return his servants report doubling the value of what had been placed in their care, except for the third servant who calls the master a scoundrel and informs him that he has done nothing but keep the funds secure. “Here’s your dough. You’re a kleptomaniac.”

It has been our custom to identify the master with God and to accept the man’s pronouncement that the servant was wicked and lazy. We have said that the servant’s criticism of his master is

invalid and that, even if it were true that the master took stuff he was not entitled to, it showed how mysterious God is and that we have no business judging the sovereign God. So we drew three “truths” from the parable: 1) Respect the sovereign God. 2) Use productively the talents/gifts God gives you. 3) There will be rewards and punishments.

Luke presents four significant additions to the story line.

1. In Luke, the man though still nameless is called a nobleman, which we interpreted to mean ‘honorable,’ an unfortunate translation. High born or born in the lap of luxury would be a better rendering of the Greek in this instance.
2. The high-born man distributes his property for ten servants to manage while he goes not just on a journey (a la Matthew), but travels to a distant country in order to receive “kingly power.”
3. The people of the nobleman’s community despise him and send delegates to the far country to lobby against his receiving a kingship.
4. When the nobleman returns as king, he orders the execution of all those who opposed him.

We have consistently ignored the fact that Luke’s version is precisely a chapter from the life of Herod the Great, who had gone to Rome and schmoozed for perhaps two years in order to obtain the kingship of Palestine. Jerusalem Pharisees had sent a protest delegation to Rome. People were executed when Herod returned as king. Some commentators mention this coincidence but drop it, finding no significance in it.

Later, upon the death of the elder Herod, the scenario was repeated by three of his sons—Antipas, Philip, and Archelaus—who travelled to Rome and lobbied as rivals for the same kingly authority. Again Jerusalem sent its protest. Again more people

died in Jerusalem in the aftermath.

## COMMENTS and QUESTIONS GROWING OUT OF THE LUKE PARABLE

- A. Since the Luke parable reads like history which Jesus' hearers had to have known, I find it impossible to think that they would have understood the parable as we have traditionally interpreted it.
- B. If the common people of a community say that a high-born person in their community is a scoundrel, shouldn't the reader at least consider the possibility that the folks are right?
- C. Why have we concluded that the nobleman is God and that the people are simply showing how stubbornly they are stuck in their sin? How could Jesus have meant to imply and how could his hearers have inferred that the Herods were models for God?
- D. When the nobleman-now-king rewards the steward who gained ten-for-one by appointing him ruler over ten towns, does the name Decapolis come to mind? Imagine this: all the people in the community believe that this king is a scoundrel, and you—steward #1—are going to rule the Decapolis for him. The king murders all his detractors without due process and you are willing to serve in his administration?
- E. When Rome gave Herod the title of king, we know that the title was backed up by the military might of the Empire. When person #3 speaks his criticism of the new king, do the words "speaking truth to power" come to mind?
- F. Does "speaking the truth to power" reasonably describe the things Jesus says and does in Jerusalem during the week which almost immediately followed the telling of this Lucan parable? ...right up to and including his interrogation by Pilate? (More on that below.)
- G. Luke wrote that Jesus decided to tell this parable because



he perceived that his followers thought that the “reign of God was about to happen” immediately. What might have caused Jesus’ followers to have such an expectation? Might it have had something to do with the successful encounter Jesus had just had with Zacchaeus the chief tax collector in Jericho, Luke 19:1-10? Did the telling of this parable modify their expectation?

- H. Jesus (in Luke) ends his parable with the slaughter of all the king’s enemies. Is there any reason to doubt that #3 steward would have been among those executed?
- I. Then, wrote Luke, “When (Jesus) had said this, He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” Would not Jesus have viewed himself as someone like the #3 steward? Does not this parable describe Jesus’ behavior during Holy Week? Doesn’t it predict his crucifixion?

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

**ONE – the word ‘gar’.** In Luke, steward #3 says, “For I was afraid of you.” That word ‘for’ (in Greek ‘gar’) makes the steward appear to have acted out of cowardice. However, in Greek usage, when an unspoken reality is understood, ‘gar’ may be translated as ‘although’, ‘certainly’, or ‘of course’. Several realities Jesus’ hearers would have understood were 1) the nobleman/king was evil and very dangerous and 2) the steward was laying his life on the line. (“Yes sir, this is frightening. But someone has to oppose you and tell you the truth about yourself. If I die for this, I die.”)

**TWO – Why no criticism of the Roman Empire?** Among Jesus’ teachings on the Temple Mount during the days between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday is the parable of “the tenants of the vineyard,” followed by the remark that the religious leaders all understood that Jesus told this parable against them. Isaiah told a parable which condemned God’s vineyard (read Israel) for

producing “sour grapes.” But here the blame is solely on the “vineyard keepers.” During those days on the Temple Mount, Jesus repeatedly criticized and condemned the scribes, Sadducees, high priests, and Pharisees.

Why do the Temple Mount narratives tell of no criticism of secular authorities? Other than this: The stewards/talents parable is clearly against Herod-like persons (i.e. secular leaders). By inference, then, the Roman authorities are condemned in this parable.

I think it inappropriate to quote Jesus’ words, “My kingdom is not of this world,” in response to this question. I interpret that statement to mean: “You, Pilate, derive your sovereignty from the point of a spear and overwhelming economic power. That’s not what my sovereignty is based upon.” In Luke 22:25 Jesus told his disciples how the Gentile rulers “lord it over” everybody, but added, “It shall not be so among you.” Therefore I find it hard to believe that Jesus would not speak critically of the empire during those days: their mass crucifixions, their random terror. Jesus could not have been silent. The OT prophets certainly would not have been. Where are such words from the mouth of Jesus?

Some suggest that the so-called Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem was an anti-empire political demonstration. At the time of Passover, the military governor of Judea would make a show of military might by mustering a large contingent of troops who marched into Jerusalem from the west. Jerusalemites were required to attend and mouth praises. Such a show of force would be a warning to anyone contemplating a Passover insurrection. Contrast that show of might with the donkey parade entering Jerusalem from the east with persons shouting praises to the son of King David. Was it not a parody of Roman might?

**THREE – speaking of prophetic criticism.** I remember a day in El Salvador during the base-community study. Part of our group had travelled to a mountain village in the department of Morazán. Each of us was invited to introduce ourselves to the villagers. I told them that my congregation was host to refugees from El Salvador. An old man shouted out, “Go home and stop your government! They are killing us!” Which, being interpreted, was, “Don’t stand here and tell us about your charity toward Salvadorans. Go home and speak prophetically to your government in behalf of all Salvadorans!” So I did that.

**FOUR – taking the kingdom of Heaven/God by violence.** In Matthew 11:12 we read that “the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.” Compare this with Luke 16:16: “the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone enters it violently.” Both passages had caused me consternation.

In his commentary on Luke, Frederick Danker noted that the verb in Luke 16:16 is in the passive voice, while in Matthew it is active. Every translation of Luke I’ve read has changed this passive to active. Danker commented that the passive just “did not make sense.” I think it does make sense. Throughout the history of the Church, persons of faith have “been victims of violence” as the reign of God has advanced. Thus “everyone enters it” through violence—not violence perpetrated by them but violence perpetrated upon them.

Isaac Watts wrote, “Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?” Watts got it.

Acts 14:22: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” So Paul and Barnabas advised the churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Paul and Barnabas got it. Luke got it.

I find the active voice in Matthew 11:12 confusing, especially in the light of Matthew 5:3 and 10 where the poor and those persecuted-for-the-sake-of-righteousness receive the reign of Heaven as a gift. If we try to take the reign of Heaven by whatever means, it is beyond our grasp. It is the active voice which does not make sense. Indeed “the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church.”

**FIVE – another look at Matthew 25:14-30.** Several writers/preachers I have recently encountered suggest that we today are blinded to the financial realities in Jesus’ day by our fiscal systems. 1) In Jesus’ day for someone to double the money in a brief period of time would have indicated that it was accomplished by chicanery, fraud, or theft. 2) Thus, for a master to applaud such activity would raise questions about the master’s integrity. The words of steward #3 are spot on: “You are a scoundrel!” Considering how convincing (I believe) the case is for interpreting Luke 19 as a speaking-truth-to-power parable, I conclude that Matthew must be interpreted in the same light.

**SIX – the rich get richer.** In both stewards/talents parables, the master orders that the single talent (mina in Luke) be taken from #3 steward and given to #1 who already had ten. There is a story shift here. Would one not have concluded, when the master returned from the journey, that the talents/minas would have been returned to him? Now it is implied that #1 steward keeps the ten talents/minas and receives the one hidden by #3.

I hurried home from Costa Rica in 1988 eager to teach my new discovery to my congregation—mostly low-income African-Americans. When we came to this point in the parable where the money is taken from #3 and given to #1 and the overlord says, “To them that have, more is given and from him who has nothing even what little he has will be taken away,” one of the elders

of the congregation interrupted me. She said, "The rich gets richer and the poor gets poorer." She had "got it" long ago.

Both Matthew and Luke shift from "speaking the truth to power and paying the consequences" to the reality of economic inequality. It is wrong to conclude that the parable approves such injustice and that God ordains it. In my view both Matthew and Luke agree on this.

**SEVEN – preaching this.** "How do you preach this?" you ask. For one thing, we no longer have to apologize for God, no longer have to try to explain away horrid behavior. Our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not an irascible, cantankerous megalomaniac. There are other scripture passages which teach of the wrath of God. The Luke 19 and Matthew 25 parables of stewards and talents do not.

Secondly, I believe this parable is a good text for leading into Passiontide. At least during Series C (the Year of Luke), this text ought to be the Gospel reading for the Sunday before Palm Sunday. Do we in our preaching ever adequately discuss the meaning of Jesus' passion? Sadly Luke 19:11-28 is not in the appointed lessons in our new hymnal. It used to be the Gospel reading for the twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost (which almost never occurs). However, verse 28, which I think is key, was omitted.

It would be a good reading for an observance of Renewers of Society or Renewers of the Church. When I presented this topic recently, the day was March 12, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Fr. Rutilio Grande (1977), the first of several clergy assassinated in El Salvador. Eventually this led to the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, March 24, 1980.

**EIGHT – looking for more indications of Jesus vs. Rome.** Maybe in Matthew 21:19-22. See the fig tree and "this hill" below.

**QUICK OVERVIEW OF JESUS' ACTIVITIES DURING HOLY WEEK ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 21:12 – 24:51.**

“Cleansed the temple”: house prayer vs. robbers’ den.” // Healed in the temple. // Priests & scribes indignant. // Jesus cursed a fig tree which immediately withers. // Disciples ask “How?” // Jesus says, “Faith to...throw this hill into the sea...ask in prayer.” // High priest and elders challenge Jesus’ authority. // Jesus asks them about John the Baptist’s authority. // Parable: two sons who did or did not obey Father’s command to work in vineyard. // The vineyard story where the tenants kill the owner’s son. // High priests and Pharisees plot. // Wedding-feast parable: “highways and byways”-yet the wedding guest without a proper garment was cast into the outer darkness (more ‘outer darkness’—Matt. 8:12). // Plot to trap Jesus with question about taxes to Caesar. // Sadducees question the resurrection, story of one bride and seven brothers. // Pharisees: what is the great commandment? // Jesus to Pharisees: is Messiah David’s son? // Jesus criticizes scribes and Pharisees// “The end will come after the gospel of the kingdom has been preached throughout the world.” // Jesus preaches “woe, woe, woe” to scribes and Pharisees, “hypocrites.” // O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, soon to be desolate. // “They will put you to death” and other dire predictions. // “All of which will come true before the present generation passes away.” //When? Only the Father knows. // The coming of the Son of man and dire warnings. // Chapter 24 ends. Next Jesus tells three parables: Wise and Foolish Maidens, Stewards and Talents, and “Inasmuch as you did or didn’t show grace, you did or didn’t do it to me.” Then it is Passover (chapter 26).

**A QUICK OVERVIEW OF HOLY WEEK IN LUKE 19:41 – 21:38.** (Barely two chapters in Luke.) Jesus weeps over Jerusalem as he approaches the city in the Palm Sunday parade. // “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” //Jesus “cleanses” the temple: “house of prayer vs. robbers’ den.” // Teaches daily in temple. // High

priests, scribes, leaders seek to kill him. // They challenge his authority. // He asks them about John the Baptist's authority. // Parable of vineyard tenants who kill master's son. // Scribes and high priests plot to kill him. // Question of taxes to Caesar. // Sadducees challenge "resurrection" with story of seven brothers marrying one bride. // Jesus asks scribes how can Christ be David's son. // Jesus warns against scribes. // The widow and her two-coin offering. // Jesus predicts destruction of temple and siege of Jerusalem. // There will be signs: earthquake, sun, moon, fig tree. // But the Son of man will come with deliverance. // Which will happen before present generation passes. // Jesus teaches each day in the temple, but spends nights on the Mt. of Olives. Then it is Passover. (Luke 22.)

**The fig tree and "this hill"** – The setting for this episode (found only in Matthew and Mark) is the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city. It is Monday, the day after the Palm Sunday parade. Jesus curses a fig tree which immediately withers and dies. Is there symbolism in the fig tree? (I don't know.)

Is it too great a stretch to recall the withered gourd plant in Jonah which God caused to grow and offer shade to Jonah, in a snit over being required to preach to Nineveh in the first place...and then having to watch as Nineveh repented and avoided the punishment Jonah had predicted? Soon the gourd plant was sacrificed to teach Jonah about faithful submission to God's call and acceptance of God's inclusive grace, even for Ninevites. But what about the fig tree? For what purpose was it sacrificed?

When the disciples question Jesus about the cursed fig tree, Jesus switches the subject to "this hill" and to the faith and prayer which could cause 'this hill' to end up in the sea. Why the change of focus? Why are we talking about drowning

something/someone in the sea? What was on that “hill” opposite the Mount of Olives that made it a worthy candidate for drowning? Was it the temple and its religious leaders? the military establishment on ‘this hill’? the entire Roman Empire? Does a saying about millstones come to mind? “The least of these my brothers and sisters” being offended? (Lk.17:2/Mt.18:6)

Speaking of Jonah and Nineveh, is there a lesson for us who preach prophetically? A lesson about willingness, yes—about the desire that those on whom we preach woe do repent? Can we welcome a penitent procurator? a centurion? a scribe? a High Priest? a politician in our own time?

**Postscript** : I am still trying to find a convincing connection between the three parables in Matthew 25 and the Passion of Jesus. Obviously, I see a connection in the talents/stewards parable. I am not persuaded by those who group these parables together as parables about the absent or hidden God. Herod can never be an example of God in my book. Perhaps there is something in the wise-and-foolish-maidens parable about having in you that which is required in order to go with the bridegroom (switching to John) when he is lifted up. And maybe we take up the cross by sharing (taking upon ourselves) the shame (the cursedness?) of the naked, the prisoner, those considered unclean—maybe we thus experience death, and only then know resurrection.

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# #771 Idolatry and the Gun Debate

This week's Thursday Theology came to us several weeks ago from Dr. Peter Keyel, an immunologist and Crossings board member whose theological writings appear throughout the Crossings website. In this piece, Peter responds to [Thursday Theology #767](#), in which Pr. Richard Gahl reviewed *America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé* by James E. Atwood. Although Peter hasn't read the book itself, he has gleaned from Dick's review a clear conception of Atwood's central claim that American gun culture amounts to idolatry of the gun. In his response, Peter calls that claim into question, while applying the Crossings matrix to diagnose both sides of the gun debate.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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[Based on Gahl's review,] I was somewhat disappointed by the absence of Christ in Atwood's book. Specifically, Atwood's diagnosis appears to be off, and his prognosis appears to be that more morality, more ethics, and more regulation will fix the problem.

I do not feel that Atwood has correctly diagnosed the problem. I don't feel that he successfully convicts gun owners of idolatry, because the first two of his conditions for idolatry misunderstand most gun owners' feelings. Perhaps, as an avid hunter, he bases his diagnosis on his own struggle to deny the omnipotence that his guns give him and the challenges that he has faced in dealing with the seductive call of the idols in his gun cabinet. But to me his diagnosis sounds more like a "y'all"

diagnosis that accuses others of violating the Law, rather than a “we all” diagnosis that incriminates the speaker as well. He has an escape hatch to living on the correct side of the Law, which is why he can end with a moral solution to his problem.

I think guns are the external symptoms of the idol at work, and not the idol itself. All of Atwood’s stats from the opening of the review make for a reasonable step 1 in the Crossings matrix, not a step 3. Atwood does get to step 2, when he discusses trusting guns to keep oneself safe, but he keeps this diagnosis limited to one side of the gun-control debate. Step 2 can more properly be expanded to our collective desire for safety. Whether we trust our own guns or those of the government, we are still seeking safety from an earthly power and not trusting in God. If we perceive the necessity of government regulation, then we are criticizing ourselves, implying that we cannot be trusted not to kill. Similarly, if we perceive the need of guns to protect us from government, then we are criticizing the society we’ve built, implying that we cannot trust our own institution. Either way, we reason that that something—either gun ownership or government control—is a sad but necessary institution. (Theologically we might even say we live in a fallen world.) This is as deep as we can get in a secular discussion, as it comes down to a cost-benefit analysis of which route is better, however that might be quantified. Of course, that such an analysis is done by sinners means that it will never be done right, even when we can agree on what “better” is. In the context of gun discussions, especially those considering numbers of people killed and gun idolatry, “safe” is usually one benchmark, or the benchmark, for “better.”

Theologically, though, we can move to Step 3, which Atwood seems to shy away from, since he does not need it for his analysis. In Step 3, we see that our idol here is not guns, but Safety. This idol gets all of us, whether we rely on the safety of our own

guns, or whether we rely on the government to keep us safe. The events at Sandy Hook showed us that both sides of the gun debate are half right. Neither gun ownership nor government regulation saved those kids and teachers. We are not safe in this world, and atrocities like these serve to ram that point home violently and disturbingly. We can try to be as safe as we want, but we have no protection from God, who smashes our idols of Safety on a regular basis. And yet it seems as though we'll go to our deaths trusting in Safety.

Atwood avoids Jesus, so far as I can tell from the review, at least in his function as Christ. Jesus doesn't trust in Safety. At the beginning of this Lenten season, Jesus rejects Satan's promise that the angels will bear him up lest he dash his foot against a stone. For Lent II, Jesus ignores more warnings, this time that Herod is out to get him. Instead, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, much to the astonishment of all who worship Safety. As expected, Jesus pays the price for not trying to be Safe: He is crucified. Jesus' obedience is to God, though, and that obedience is justified: God raises Jesus from the dead, showing us that there is another way.

Faith in this other way liberates us all from the stranglehold that Safety has on our hearts. We trust that death is not the end for us, and that we don't need to be Safe to save our lives. We can go to those places of death and proclaim Christ crucified. Those whose hearts are no longer hung on Safety don't need guns to keep them safe, no matter how lawful gun ownership may be. Likewise, the government is not the authority we trust to solve the problem of keeping us safe—we're in God's hands.

In some ways, we have now come to a conclusion similar to Atwood's, with a couple of important changes. Similar to Atwood, as people of faith, we can't help but be involved in sharing the Good News of the true life provided in Jesus that is not

provided by Safety. Also similarly, we don't need guns to carry out our work; we have weapons of the Spirit. But our targets aren't the guns, the government regulations, or even the violence that is done in this sin-sick world. Rather, our target is healing the sick God-connections that we all have. When we trust in the resurrection of the dead, the threat of violence ceases to be a threat. We trust that Easter follows Good Friday.

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## #770 The Preacher's Audience

Colleagues,

Dare one take it for granted that everyone who reads this will be in church more than once over Holy Week? That's less than two weeks in the offing, by the way. I say that for the sake of those of you who aren't the designated preacher for this or that assembly of the saints. We who are have already started to sweat bullets.

Indeed, the pressure is on. That the week's sermons are several is the least of it. They'll be preached from long, dense texts about the essence of the Christian faith to the biggest and most varied crowds of the year, especially on Easter Sunday. God save us for the crowd's sake from making too big a hash of it.

With this in mind we choose this week to send along some reflections by Robert Schultz on a piece I wrote in November about the imperative of approaching scriptural texts with the contemporary hearer in mind. Bob has more to say about that against the specific backdrop of the six-step methodology that shapes text studies at [Crossings.org](https://crossings.org). I trust you'll notice

Bob's invitation to receive his thoughts as a spur for further discussion, a point he underscored in an accompanying note to the editors: "These theses are formulated for discussion purposes, not as truth." I hope you'll be spurred by that to push the discussion along. Send comments as ever to cabraun98ATaolDOTcom.

If I read Bob rightly myself, he's asking preachers to remember and honor their pastoral vocation when they step into pulpits. Palm Sunday will pounce mere days from now. Let's get busy thinking about this, whether as preachers praying to make less hash than usual this time around, or as listeners praying for acute and faithful ears when the days of much hearing begin.

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

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*Note: the following theses are a direct response to earlier Thursday Theology postings. The author strongly urges readers to refresh their memories of that material before proceeding. See the links in the first paragraph.*

1. In reflecting on the comments made by [Burce on November 24](#) and by [Schroeder on November 8](#), I have formulated some theses for discussion of the role of pastoral diagnosis in sermon preparation.
2. The Crossings method is a useful method for the study of a text.
3. The Crossings method may not be as useful in the preparation of a sermon.
4. The distinction between the study of a text and the preparation of a sermon is an important distinction.
5. The Crossings method focuses on identifying the person in the text who has the problem.

6. The sermon is focused on the need of those who will hear the sermon.
7. Those present in the congregation have come to worship God. The sermon is a helpful element of worship but is not essential in such a way that worship cannot occur if there is no sermon.
8. The preacher focuses on the need(s) of those who will hear the sermon rather than on the need of one individual—which requires pastoral care.
9. In determining the need which the sermon will address, the preacher seeks to identify a common need of the people who will gather for worship—as part of their worship they will hear and reflect on the sermon.
10. The worship of some members may be more enriched by other elements of the service, for example, by meeting their need to worship in a group, by the administration of the sacraments, or by reinforcing their identity as members of this group of worshippers.
11. For diagnostic purposes, the common need of members of a group gathered for worship can be compared to an epidemic in which there is a common problem even though the symptoms of each individual may differ.
12. Diagnostic skill is measured by the accurate identification of the epidemic as the cause of the symptoms.
13. Therapeutic skill is measured by the treatment of the underlying illness of the epidemic.
14. Conversion of symptoms of one kind into symptoms of another kind may be helpful but is management rather than therapy. For example, converting unbelief, shame, or guilt into some other spiritual problem may be helpful but does not resolve the underlying problem.
15. In the organization of the congregations that we individually serve as pastors, the pastor begins his

preparation for the sermon with the task of identifying these symptoms in the people who will hear the sermon and diagnosing them as having a common source.

16. This common source of these symptoms, that is, the epidemic, is described as law in the Lutheran Confessions.
17. The symptoms of the experience of the law presented by members of the congregation are manifold.
18. The New Testament uses a rich variety of images in describing these varied symptoms of people's actual experience of the work of the law.
19. The Book of Concord similarly refers to a variety of images and their accompanying symptoms without ranking them.
20. The symptoms of the work of the law that are described in the text and/or that may predominate in the preacher's personal experience may or may not coincide with the symptoms experienced by the persons described in the text or by the preacher.
21. The problem to be addressed in the sermon is the problem experienced by a significant number (not necessarily all) of the people who will hear the sermon.

Robert C. Schultz  
Seattle, Washington

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## #769 Judgment Day (Part 2)

As promised, here is Steve Albertin's sermon on Mark 13:1-8, which he introduced with the dramatic scene (still of unknown authorship) that we brought you [last week](#). In the sermon, Steve delves into the meaning of Jesus' prediction of a day when

buildings will fall, and a time when nation will rise against nation.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## **“Judgment Day”**

### **Mark 13:1-8**

Christ Church  
The Lutheran Church of Zionsville  
Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

In today’s Gospel the disciples admire an immense, imposing, and enduring structure—the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus did not share their admiration. Instead he said, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

In the next forty years, not only would the temple be destroyed, but Jesus’ disciples would be harassed and persecuted. Many would lose their lives at the hands of their enemies. Their world would fall apart. Jesus’ words would come true: “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.”

We look at our world and we wonder if anything has changed. We sense that we too are on the brink of disaster.

I recently read a frightening description of what might happen in a nuclear attack that could devastate not only this country but much of the world. There would be an “incredible firestorm in which hundreds of tons of sooty smoke would absorb so much of



the sun's rays that only five percent of the normal amount of light would reach the earth...All land plants would be damaged or destroyed...The temperature would plummet for several months...All biological life on the planet would be gravely threatened."

Such a description makes me shudder. I begin to wonder if the end of this world isn't all that far away. It is easy to think of giving up.

But there is a strange irony in all of this. The supporters of nuclear weapons and its critics, the environmentalists and the disciples of big business, the hawks and the doves, the lovers of gas guzzlers and the lovers of hybrids, and all of us who worry about how we are going to make it to tomorrow, share one fundamental assumption. Our survival is all the matters.

That's why Jesus' words in today's gospel are so unsettling: he says that it will all end, with wars, destruction, nation rising against nation.

But when? We want to know when, as if we could do anything about it.

The Romans destroyed the temple in A.D. 70. A few more centuries and the Roman Empire fell, but the world did not come to an end.

Was Jesus wrong?

The world has not come to an end. Judgment Day has not yet arrived. However, in a sense it has already has. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, God's judgment on this sinful and broken world came crashing down on God's very own Son and this whole sinful world he had chosen to love. On that dark Friday Jesus suffered Judgment Day for all of us. When he breathed his last painful breath, it looked like Jesus was doomed. It looked like his fate would be no different from the fate all of us must

face when we have to meet our maker covered in the dirt of failure and shame.

However, Judgment Day was not over. God raised Jesus from the dead, God declared that God's love trumps God's judgment. Jesus is God's trump card offered to a world looking for hope when the only hand it is holding is a loser. When God raised Jesus, our Judgment Day was reversed. Through the promise of the gospel, God offers us the consequences of not our Judgment Day but Jesus' Judgment Day.

Therefore, just when it seems that all the cards are stacked against us, we have an ace in the hole. We are holding the ultimate trump card. We get to "euchre" all those who would do us in. The game is already over.

Ever since the day we were washed in the waters of the font, we died and rose with Christ. We already endured our last judgment. Drowned with Christ and raised to new life, the worst has already happened. The final judgment has already begun.

When we eat and drink the Lord's Supper, we already have a "foretaste of the feast to come." We eat and drink of Him for whom the Judgment Day has already happened. We already taste a fate he has won for us. We already get to live on the other side of Judgment Day.

Whenever that last day arrives and we breathe our last, whenever the world comes crashing to an end, we can be sure that the ultimate Judge of all people, places and things will look at us, clinging to His boy, and declare, "You are in!"

In those difficult times when the world seems to be falling apart, we can trust the promise of Christ confident of what our future will be. Our fate is no longer dependent on whether we can stop a terrorist attack, prevent the spread of weapons of

mass destruction, halt global warming, pass the next test, have lots of friends, or defeat the dreaded disease within us.

Like Jesus' disciples we may be shaking in our shoes. But Jesus tells us, Do not be alarmed. We don't have to be afraid of tomorrow, of a nuclear holocaust or an environmental disaster or a fiscal cliff or a phone call at 3 a.m. or a pink slip or not having a date for the school dance or a letter of rejection. We already have experienced Judgment Day. For us the world has already ended. The worst has already happened. We have died—not alone, but with Christ. Whoever dies with him, will be raised with him. We don't have to worry about saving ourselves, our skins, our investments, our possessions, our reputations, or our pride. Christ already has.

Jesus compares it to the pangs of birth. When a mother begins the painful ordeal of childbirth, there are times when she feels defeated. The pain is too great. The suffering is too much. But what keeps her going is the promise of a new life. That promise gives her the strength to smile through the pain and endure the labor.

Right now it may look like our world is going to hell in a handbasket. The future may not look bright. Danger may seem to be around every corner. But we have the blessed assurance that the final outcome has already been determined. Judgment Day already happened when Jesus was crucified for us and rose again. On the cross Jesus suffered the final judgment for us.

That doesn't mean that we should throw in the towel on this world and give up. We can and should still work for justice and fairness, for the environment, for a safer and cleaner society, because this is still God's world and through us God still loves it. But we can do it without fear, without living under the burden that it all depends on us. We know where it is all

headed. We can be confident of tomorrow. We look forward to Judgment Day!

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## #768 Judgment Day (Part 1)

Today's Thursday Theology is short dramatic scene by the Rev. Dr. Steve Albertin, a frequent Crossings writer and my fellow editor on the ThTheol tem. Steve composed this scene in December 2012, as an introduction to a sermon on Mark 13:1-8. In that gospel text, Jesus discusses the end times and the impending destruction of the temple. Next week we'll bring you the sermon itself, in which Steve tackles the question of how to square Jesus' prediction of impending judgment with the clear, hard fact that the world did not end in the disciples' lifetimes.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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### **"Judgment Day"**

#### **Mark 13:1-8**

Christ Church  
The Lutheran Church of Zionsville  
Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin  
December 15, 2012

#### Introductory Drama

*(Scene: The entrance to eternity. A man sits at a desk, papers before him. A woman enters. She goes to the man and stands*

*quietly. The man looks up.)*

A: Heaven on your right—hell on your left.

B: *(Looking at the doors, in awe)* You mean that door leads to heaven...and that one to hell?

A: That is correct. Please don't take too long. There are others waiting.

B: But...what do I do?

A: You go through one of them.

B: You mean I have the choice?

A: That is correct.

B: *(Craftily)* Oh, well, I'll take heaven.

A: *(Motioning)* Over there, please.

B: Well, thanks... *(She starts toward heaven gleefully. As she is about to go through the door, she stops a moment. She turns and comes back.)* Now look. I don't want to make any mistakes at a time like this. You're giving me my choice...I can go to heaven or to hell. That's what you said, isn't it?

A: That is correct.

B: I mean, if I choose heaven, it's not some sort of...er...test or something? There are no strings attached?

A: There are no strings attached.

B: *(Relieved)* I had no idea it would be like this. Well, thanks... *(She starts toward heaven. She hesitates, then comes back.)* Now I don't want you to think that just because I choose heaven that I've always been a model of good

behavior... *(Hastily)* I haven't always been perfect. Who has? *(She laughs as though sharing a joke.)* I'm not trying to get out of anything.

A: I understand.

B: All right, then. Just so long as it's clear. *(She starts toward heaven. Hesitates. Comes back.)* Er...pardon me...

A: Yes?

B: I mean, once I go in there, I *stay* there?

A: You stay there.

B: I mean this *is*...er...Judgment Day?

A: This is Judgment Day.

B: And once I make my decision, it's final...

A: Final.

B: I don't believe it! That's not the way it is at all! The righteous go to heaven and are rewarded for their goodness... The wicked go to hell and are punished for their sins! Ask anybody!

A: Please don't take too long. There are others waiting.

B: But this is idiotic! Doesn't everybody choose heaven?

A: Some.

B: Look, have I got it wrong? In heaven the streets are paved with gold, isn't that so?

A: That is correct.

B: And hell is a burning pit where you burn forever. Isn't that

right?

A: That is correct.

B: Then I fail to understand why anyone would choose to . . .  
.  
*(She starts toward heaven. Hesitates. Comes back.)* What's going on here? Don't you know I've lived all my life in fear of this day with the view of getting into heaven and cheating hell? What are you trying to get away with around here? I demand a fair trial!

A: No trial.

B: You mean to sit there and tell me this is Judgment Day and there's no trial?

A: That is correct.

B: This is outrageous! I demand a hearing! My father pulled a trick like this on me once and I never forgave him. I was in the fifth grade. I skipped school one day. I came home later and he asked me where I'd been. I told him I'd been in school. Lied to him. He said the school had called up and asked where I was. I wasn't there. So I told him the truth... I confessed... I told him I'd lied and everything! And what did he do? He *grinned* at me and went back to his paper! *(Savagely)* What kind of business is that? He should have taken that strap and beaten me within an inch of my life! *(More angry)* Now I come up here... Judgment Day... ready to pay for my sins... *(She beats on the table)* I want a hearing! I demand a trial!

A: No trial. Please don't take too long.

B: It's not fair... You can't do this to me... I'm innocent... I never had the chance that other people had... I've had a hard life... I didn't mean to do anything bad... Give me just one more chance... *(She starts running to the door into hell.)* Please...

A: There are others waiting.

B: Father! Father! Help me! (*She runs out of the door into hell*)

A: (*Looking up*) Next, please

To the left, hell. To the right, heaven. And she went left. I don't get it. What was the matter with her? Couldn't she see the obvious? And she chose hell. She couldn't help herself.

But heaven without a trial? Heaven without an opportunity to justify herself?

We would not make that mistake! Or would we?

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## #767 The Deified Gun

Colleagues,

This week we send you a “must read” book review by occasional contributor Richard Gahl. Dick's piece speaks for itself, so I won't bother with introductory embellishments. Read, mark, learn—and prepare to weep, especially when you get to the end.

I do note that Dick touches on something that got a mention in [last week's post](#), Luther's notion of the sinner being “curved in” on the sinner's self. A reader wrote yesterday to correct my rendering of the concept in Latin. It's not “curvatus in se,” but “incurvatus in se,” or more precisely—so the reader recalled hearing long ago from some precise Germans—“incurvatus in se et seipsum.” It seems that Luther may have picked the concept up from Augustine. The reader went on to cite a passage from Luther's lectures on Romans where it makes an appearance:



*Our nature, by the corruption of the [first sin](#), [is] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the [works-righteous](#) and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.*

I think you'll find that deeply germane to what Dick is talking about in his review.

Amid the penitence that this calls for—

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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## **America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé.**

**By James E. Atwood. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.**

**228 pages. US\$27.**

*Jimmy had a pistol stuck in the waistband at the small of his back, and he reached back under his coat and touched it from time to time, a talisman of power.*

John Sandford, Mad River. 2012

Atwood, a retired Presbyterian pastor and avid hunter, has been an advocate for more effective ways to stop gun violence for over thirty-six years. A few facts pulled together from various sections of the book: 300,000,000 guns in the US; an average of 30,000 gun related deaths per year; children in the US are twenty-five times more likely to die from guns than children in twenty-five other industrialized nations combined; half of gun-related deaths are suicides; with the presence of a gun in the home American women are five times more likely to be victims of

domestic violence. In a word, America, we have a problem!

Atwood also documents the NRA's influence in quashing any legislation that might have a negative impact on the gun culture. A report that Ohio is one of two states that issues concealed-carry weapons permits to the blind is enough to question the sanity of the legislators of my home state. Chapters on media violence in cultures around the world and the creeping intrusion of gun language into everyday speech are sobering. This book is an important read for church leaders in our current gun-culture climate.

But what really makes this material sizzle is the theological exposé. Walter Brueggemann's foreword introduces the idolatry of America's gun culture. He characterizes it as "a false authority that requires uncompromising allegiance and that makes promises of well-being that it cannot keep (xi)." A good friend has put it this way for some people: In guns we trust!

Twice Atwood quotes former NRA executive Warren Cassidy's statement: "You would get a far better understanding of the NRA if you were approaching us as one of the great religions of the world (19, 78)." Such a self-assessment makes gun advocates into true believers. Atwood lists three conditions that prevail when a gun becomes an idol.

1. An owner believes there are no circumstances when a regulation or restriction for public safety should be placed upon it.
2. An owner believes that guns don't kill; they only save lives.
3. An owner has no doubt that guns preserve America's most cherished values. (21)

He sees America's idolatry of guns "as a confrontational belief system based on acquiring power over others...Those who believe

need guns to prove to themselves and to others that they are in control, to protect them from harm, and to give them a sense of security (22).” At this point Atwood brings in Luther’s first-commandment comments from the Large Catechism about the meaning of having a god. Some pages later, Atwood references Letty Russell’s statement from her book *Becoming Human*: “Persons and groups who are anxious about whether they measure up to cultural standards of superiority usually cut down others to their size.” He adds to her statement: an effective tool for cutting others down to size is a gun (88). John Sandford’s “talisman of power” is an apt rephrasing of the magic of the godlike power that captures trust. Luther’s definition of sin, curved in on one’s self, echoes here.

*Reverence for guns teaches two paradoxical emotions: omnipotence and fear. Omnipotence as one feels the thrill of being in charge and able to dominate others, and fear as one begins to suspect enemies or potential enemies who might want to take away one’s newfound power. (116)*

The writings of Walter Wink regarding principalities and powers, especially the phrase “redemptive violence,” figure prominently in Atwood’s idolatry schema for guns.

The fifth commandment is not neglected in these pages. Violence is brought front and center already in Chapter 5, “Violence Lite and its Insatiable Observers.” The second half of the book picks up this theme in theological detail. Atwood states that “if one looks to tools of violence for deliverance, one grows to be like those tools. The Psalmists words ring true: Those who make idols are like them; so are all who trust in them [Psalm 115:8] (114).”

Former NRA board member Jeff Cooper, writing in *Guns and Ammo*, illustrates the extreme of looking to tools of violence for

society solutions. "The consensus is that no more than five to ten people in a hundred who die by gunfire in Los Angeles are any loss to society...It would seem a valid service to keep them [gangs] well-supplied with ammunition (128)." In a word, my life is more important than many other lives.

Atwood brings this argument about violence to a stunning conclusion quoting from John Dear's 1993 book *Disarming the Heart: Toward a Vow of Nonviolence*.

*Violence is the act of forgetting who we are: brothers and sisters of one another, each one a child of God. Violence occurs in those moments when we forget and deny our basic identity as God's children, when we treat others as if they were worthless instead of priceless and cling to our own selfish desires, possessions, and security. In the effort to claim our inheritance as loved children of God, we must love one another, even our enemies. We must remember who we are. (213-214)*

Atwood wrote this book to involve increasing numbers of churches and people of faith in an important conversation for our times. He rejects the premise that reducing gun violence is the purview of the political process. "Violence and unnecessary death require spiritual, ethical, and moral solutions" (192). He makes his case in a book worth careful reading and discussion. The time is now to debunk the myths and idolatry of many captured by the gun culture. His haunting question is too late, however, for the teachers and students of Sandy Hook Elementary School.

*Dare we ask where twenty elementary school children would hide in a classroom if a monster kicked open the door holding an assault pistol with an enlarged magazine of thirty rounds? (121)*

Richard Gahl  
Westlake, Ohio

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## **#766 Ash Wednesday Musings, with a Nudge from Machiavelli**

Colleagues,

I'm sticking my neck out this week with a piece that will either please or appall, I don't know which. I write with Christ's glory in mind. May you read it in the same light. If there should be argument, let it be about that. What else is there to vaunt?

A reminder that any and all submissions to Thursday Theology will be gratefully received and eagerly reviewed in the hope and expectation that we can pass them along. Do send us yours. Soon.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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To the topic above:

I have a hunch that this is the first time any of you have seen Niccolo Machiavelli associated with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday, after all, is all about sinner's remorse (isn't it?), whereas "Machiavellian" is a synonym for blithe and willful amorality, at least in the spheres of politics and governance, yes?

Or might it be that common usage has done old Niccolo an injustice? And while I'm at it, is Ash Wednesday really meant to drive us into beating our breasts and changing our ways, or is it better observed when the focus is somewhere else?

I got to thinking about both these things last weekend after reading David Brooks's regular column in the Friday edition of the *New York Times*. Under the title "[Florence and the Drones](#)" (Feb. 8, 2013), he laid out a quick summary of insights gained from a recent week of reading Machiavelli for a course at Yale.

Two things jumped out at me. The first was Machiavelli's Luther-like appreciation for the hold that self-interest has on the human heart. I don't suppose he knew or used the term *curvatus in se* (turned in on oneself), but, according to Brooks, he described to a "T" what human behavior looks like when this happens to be the essential condition of the beings in question. It isn't pretty. Effective rulers, said Machiavelli, will understand this. They'll operate accordingly. After all, effective ruling means starting with facts on the ground, a point, as it happens, that Luther made about useful theology (thus Burce, not Brooks). Neither ruler nor theologian will do us much good if they base their work on notions plucked from somebody's theoretical stratosphere. A down-to-earth grasp of sin's nature and ubiquity is of the essence in both spheres of endeavor. (Come to think of it, Luther and Machiavelli were contemporaries, Luther the younger by fourteen years, both breathing the intellectual airs of the day. That their operative assumptions might overlap at points should not be surprising.)

Next Machiavellian point: it takes a virtuous leader to handle a brutish populace. Yes, you read that right. Brooks insists that Machiavelli was very big on virtue and high ideals, only—

*"he just had a different concept of political virtue. It would*

*be nice, he writes, if a political leader could practice the Christian virtues like charity, mercy and gentleness and still provide for his people. But, in the real world, that's usually not possible. In the real world, a great leader is called upon to create a civilized order for the city he serves. To create that order, to defeat the forces of anarchy and savagery, the virtuous leader is compelled to do hard things, to take, as it were, the sins of the situation upon himself."The leader who does good things cannot always be good himself. Sometimes bad acts produce good outcomes. Sometimes a leader has to love his country more than his soul."*

"Wow," says the pastor-theologian who thinks in furrows plowed by Luther. Gutsy stuff, is it not? Especially if he's being serious, not flippant, about souls hanging in the balance. All the more gutsy if he's daring his prince to wing it on his own without counting on a crucified, sin-bearing King to catch him when he falls, as indeed he must and is bound to. I wonder if Machiavelli knew anything at all of last night's second text, that incredible assertion at the end of 2 Cor. 5: "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, that we might become in him the righteousness of God." If and when I ever get around to browsing his writings, that's what I'll be looking for, though not expecting to find it.

In the meantime, thanks to Brooks, I think I'll admire Machiavelli for a while. Caveat: does he still scare me? Sure, for reasons Brooks turns to at the end of his column. Princes too are sinners—"venal self-deceivers" in Brooks's phrasing—and such creatures have a habit of turning monstrous under the kind of burdens that Machiavelli would have them bear. Still, I do wish that Christians were as clear-eyed as Machiavelli is about the sheer impossibility of tiptoeing through life in a sinners' pigpen without getting dirty. Instead, visions of Moses-style

righteousness keep dancing through Christian heads, and they keep attempting to live those dreams. I imagine Machiavelli would regard that as both stupid and irresponsible, and I'd have to agree with him. So would that Prodigal Son par excellence who entered the pigpen not to beat on its denizens but to join them at the trough. As it is written, "This fellow welcomes sinners, and eats with them" (Lk. 15:1). Then he went to his death, tarred with their stink, made to be sin for the sinners, as Paul puts it. Paul also calls this the "act of righteousness" that pulls the rabbit of a saint's future from the hat of a sinner's fate (Ro. 5:18). That other fellow in sixteenth-century Wittenberg who got what this was all about was moved, so we're told, to tell a prissy colleague to get over it and sin boldly. Had Machiavelli caught wind of this way down there in Florence, he might have added, "Sin wisely while you're at it." Or so I'd like to think.

And here's another thought I toss your way: isn't daring to sin for the sake of the sinner a piece of what Jesus has in mind when he tells us to take up our crosses and follow him? I say this gingerly. I don't mean to suggest that Machiavelli's political proposals are the kind of sinning-for-the-sinners'-sake that our Lord would have in mind. I will submit that we cannot be for others as Christ was and is for us without incurring guilt under the Law of God, thereby earning the cross we carry. Muse on that this Lent, if you would. If you think I'm all wet, feel free to tell me. A bit of back-and-forth debating in these postings might be fun for a change.

Let me add that this is much more than a matter for abstract contemplation. It cuts directly to facts on the ground of the sort that Machiavelli was so well attuned to. For example, either we suck it up as sin-bearers-for-sinners or we make the kind of mistake LCMS President Matthew Harrison stumbled into last week when, to mollify the pure-doctrine crowd in his ranks,



he called the synod's young pastor in Newtown, Connecticut on the carpet for having risked a benediction amid doctrinal sinners at the community's post-Sandy Hook mourning event, the one the U.S. president attended. To his enormous credit, President Harrison later apologized for having done this. May he pardon me for citing the incident even so to illustrate how a yen for righteousness will yield unrighteousness; how a horror of sin can multiply sin. ELCA Lutherans have their own assorted ways of falling prey to this. So does every other Christian tribe that I'm aware of.

Or ponder this: by all reports no one in the world today is hungrier for law-centered righteousness or more eager to escape the stain of other people's sin than the Taliban.

Which brings me at last to Ash Wednesday, which ought to be of great help to Christians in this matter, but usually isn't. What is this service if not a contemplation—or better, a proclamation—about the inextricable pickle we sinners are in. Dust we are, to dust we shall return, and there's not a thing we can do to change that. At this point the only thing that matters is the cross that the ashes advertise when they're painted on the forehead.

Only then the talking begins, and wouldn't you know, so much of it ignores the cross and touts instead the penitent's Johnny-come-lately turn into better behavior, as if God Almighty is going to be impressed by that. As if more fasting, more prayer, and the giving of more alms are what the death sentence is meant to educe. And if that kind of preaching hits its mark, what you get is uptight clean-freaks who are scared to death of wading in the mud where sinners wallow, thereby defying the Lord who sends them there. Please! Will we not preach Christ and his singular righteousness and be done with it? On this day of days, what else is there to offer that's of any use at all to anyone? How

else do we ever find the nerve and freedom to take the counterintuitive plunge, in Christ and with Christ, into being sin for the sinful neighbor's sake? To what else is the Holy Spirit calling us?

Something for all of us to think about, perhaps, before the next Ash Wednesday rolls around.

Jerome Burce

The day after Ash Wednesday, 2013

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## #765 God's deadly diagnosis

This week we bring you a piece that the Rev. Dr. Steve Albertin presented at the Crossings Seminar last month in Belleville, Illinois. In making his point about the importance of God's "deadly diagnosis" of our sinfulness, Steve includes one of his own sermons from 2009 on the proclamation of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

(By the way, if you missed [Thursday Theology #763](#), which featured Ed Schroeder's discussion of the film *Carnage*, you may want to start there. Steve mentions the film at several points in this essay.)

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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# **“It Can’t Be All That Bad: Why God’s Deadly Diagnosis of Our Human Condition Matters”**

**Crossings Training Seminar**

**January 22, 2013**

**Steven E. Albertin**

When I shared the title of this conference (“Good News We Don’t Want to Hear – Preaching to a Skeptical Word”) with a friend a few months ago, he stared at me rather incredulously. What a strange title! *Why would anyone not want to hear good news?* Then he answered his own question: *Probably because it is too good to be true.* You know what they say about those late night TV ads for some incredible weight loss product that is going to make you look like you are 18 again with all kinds of girls crawling all over you for date and you don’t have to exercise or starve yourself...all for \$19.95. *If it sounds like it is too good to be true, it probably is.*

My presentation is going to flip this familiar advice on its ear. If people are skeptical of news that is just too good to be true, then they are also skeptical of news that is just too bad to be true.

That has been my experience of preaching weekly in a congregation for over thirty years. Inevitably, some listener in my congregation will complain that my sermons are too dark and negative. “Pastor, it can’t be that bad. Our sin can’t be that bad, our life can’t be that bleak and God can’t be that upset with us.” Any hint of what the Crossings Matrix calls D-3 or “The Eternal Problem” or “The God Problem” or “the judgment and wrath of God” or Step Three offends listeners. They disagree with my diagnosis. “We aren’t that bad and God isn’t that upset. After all, God is good...all the time. All the time...God is good.”

The goodness of God is a given. “Pastor, just look around you.

Isn't it obvious?"

But I am not so sure it is so obvious. That is not what I see when I look at the world in which I live and the lives I saw portrayed in Roman Polanski's film *Carnage* that we saw yesterday. Life can get pretty ugly. People can be cruel. Bad things happen. No wonder Penelope, Michael, Nancy, and Alan descend into a cauldron of cruelty and carnage. No wonder that it is with a sense of cynicism and defiance that Alan Cowan declares his religion: "Penelope, I believe in the god of carnage. The god who rules has been unchallenged since time immemorial."

When I ask my critics about Jesus and what he has to do with goodness of God, I usually get some pious rambling about a Jesus who reveals what is already and obviously true anyway. Jesus does not change anything or make any difference to what is already a given. With a tenacious piety they cling to this *a priori*, fundamental theological presupposition that refuses to be confused by the facts and that no one dare call into question: "God is good all the time. All the time God is good."

Hmmm. But if I ask, "How do you know that God is good all the time? What is the basis of such a belief?" they look at me with disdain and disgust. I get the feeling that they think I am disrespectful and irreverent. How dare I ask a question like this? I'm the pastor. I am not supposed to question the goodness of God. My job is to defend it. That is what good Christians do. They are committed believing, no matter what, that God is good...all the time. And all the time...God is good.

If I ask how I can believe in God when there is so much suffering, hurt, and *carnage* in life, I am usually told to "buckle up and believe." Sometimes I feel bad for daring to imply that God might somehow have something to do with the bad

things of life. The pleasantly polite cultural religion of America has staked its hopes on a pleasantly malleable karma that always seems to work to our advantage. If something goes badly, we just need to work a little harder and make a few more adjustments.

The cultural orthodoxy of *moralistic, therapeutic deism* (see the work of sociologist Christian Smith at Notre Dame) assumes that a God of beautiful sunset, fine music, pleasant feelings, and human fulfillment would not have anything to do with really bad things. Bad things happen because people are only human. They make mistakes that a little more education, elbow grease, or government funding can surely correct. Bad things happen because God sort of loses control every once in a while. Occasionally it might look like evil has gotten the upper hand. However, in the end the goodness of God will win out. What looks bad now just looks that way. Change the way you look at things, believe in the goodness of God, be good, and it will work out all right in the end.

It reminds me of the kind of fatalistic faith that I saw portrayed in a wonderful film of the last year, "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel," where the protagonist repeatedly repeats his faith in the goodness of destiny, his synonym for God: "In the end everything will turn out all right. And if things don't turn out alright, it's not the end." This fatalistic commitment to believe that all will turn out alright in the end sounds more Hindu than Christian. Yet this is often how I hear the very people of my congregation speak of Christian faith.

When I hear people talk like this, I sense that they are trying to defend God or get God off the hook. Does God really need defending? Does God need us to make God look good and keep God's nose clean?

I don't think so. I think God is up to the task. Besides, defending God seems like a terribly big job and one that I don't think I am up to. God is capable of doing that himself (which of course God has done in Christ crucified and risen—more on that later).

This is my point. God's deadly diagnosis of our human condition matters, because without this diagnosis, Christ's work gets wasted and its promising comfort is thwarted.

God's deadly diagnosis matters for two reasons. One is theological. One is pastoral.

First, the theological reason: D3 diagnoses the human predicament from two perspectives. From the human, anthropological side, the Law exposes the fact that we are stuck in our sin, trapped in our failed projects and unable to do anything about it. We have God-sized problems, huge, immense problems from which it will take huge, superhuman, divine intervention to free us. Again, *Carnage* provided a vivid picture of just how trapped humans are in that condition. However, there is also the theological side of D3. The law finally reveals that God has handed us over to this predicament. As sinners we are under God's judgment and wrath. This is more than a God-sized problem. This is "The God Problem." God is now the problem. God can only save a world under the judgment of God's law. If God is to love and save the world, God must come to terms with God's own judgment. Solving that problem takes a crucified and risen Christ, the death of the second person of the Trinity.

Then there is the pastoral, experiential, and existential reason for recognizing the depth of D3. If Christ does not provide for us hope for life, then who does? The world is filled with alternatives all standing in line to offer us their hopes..."for a fee." Of course, it is up to us come up with the fee. It is up

to us to make the law work. We still gotta *do* something. As a result, the unconditional comfort and blessed good news of Christ is compromised. The monkey is still on our back. We still need to do something. Christ is important but still needs to be supplemented by something we do, our works, our faith, our commitment, our obedience, our submission, our sincerity without which we can never be sure that we are still in the good graces of God.

The deadly diagnosis of D3 exposes the terrifying fact that God is THE final, ultimate and eternal problem for sinners. God's law, God's judgment, stands over sinners ready to send them to eternal oblivion. The only one who can solve the God Problem is God. If God's love is going to triumph and have its way with us, God has got to do away with God's law and do it in a way that does not just blow off the law as a good idea that went bad. God is serious about God's law and yet God must break hold the hold of God's law on humanity in a way that does not pretend that the law never mattered.

The ultimate God Problem is that God has a problem. What is God to do with people who not only behave badly but also want to thumb their noses at their creator? What does God do with God's law and the sinners that have broken it? At the same time, what does God do with God's desire to love God's people no matter what? The depth of God's deadly diagnosis means that God is going to have to do something dramatic and costly to get God's people loved. That will take a crucified and risen Son of God. Without such assurance, the comforting and liberating good news of gospel will always remain qualified. The promise of the gospel will be muffled.

That message is difficult to preach to a skeptical world. The world cannot be so bad off and in such trouble that it would take a God willing to love the world this much. People will not

accept the depth of this diagnosis and the shock of this kind of indictment unless they already know that they are tethered to someone who will not let them go. It is just too scary to dangle over the cliff like this. People cannot risk admitting that they are in this much trouble unless they know that they are already loved. Such a confession is only possible if one has heard and trusted the promise of the gospel.

As we apply the Crossings/Law/Gospel matrix to Biblical texts and human lives for the sake of preaching, we need to remember that fact. Even though the Crossings matrix analysis requires *"From Three to Four and not before"* (D3 before P1, or the Eternal Problem before the Eternal Solution), in the actual preaching and pastoral care of people such recognition by the hearer happens as a fruit of faith. The preacher theologically knows that Three must come before Four. But pastorally, in the lived experience of people on whom the Word of God through Law and Gospel is actually doing diagnosis and prognosis, full recognition of the depth of D3 happens in Step 5. The actual crossing and application of Christ in Step 4 results in the faith of Step 5. Christ makes faith possible. From faith flows repentance and the acknowledgement of the depth of sin and the terror of God's judgment.

When the preacher insists that the hearers of God's Word first acknowledge the depth of Step 3 before encountering Step 4, that you gotta admit how bad you are before you are ready to receive the gracious promise of the Gospel, the hearer" surely will flee in disbelief like the tax collector, or resist in defiance like the Pharisee. No wonder that Penelope, Michael, Nancy, and Alan in *Carnage*, as profound as their awareness of their predicament is, are never able to admit that God is the enforcer of their predicament. The diagnosis is true but the hearers cannot face the burden of this truth without knowing that someone is with them holding their hand and walking with them through death and



resurrection. Of course, that someone is Christ.

This administration of God's deadly diagnosis through the law along with God's life-giving prognosis through the gospel is at the center of my ministry and preaching. Without God's deadly diagnosis, Christ and the comfort he offers get wasted. The best way I know to show you how and why this matters, is to give you an example of how that happens in my preaching.

Hence, I offer you this sermon from 2009.

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"FORGIVE AND FORGET?"

Jeremiah 31:31-34

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

*It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.*

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Someone has wronged you, betrayed you, stabbed you in the back. You are angry, fuming, ready to strangle them. You complain to a trusted friend about what has happened to you. He tells you, "Steve, you have got to move on with your life. Continuing to

stew about this is just going to eat you up. Why don't you just *forgive and forget*?"

*Forgive and forget!* Ask someone in the coffee shop or at the water cooler what forgiveness means and that is probably what he will tell you. To forgive means to forget about it. To forgive means to stop remembering the hurt or the injustice done to you and to put all that behind you. To forgive means to move on with your life and live as if the hurt never happened.

People who offer such advice probably think they are being helpful. They probably think their advice is even comforting. They think that forgetting is at the heart of forgiveness. But how mistaken they are! To think that forgiving distorts the true nature of forgiveness. It trivializes the hurt that it is meant to heal. It deprives forgiveness of its true redeeming power. Ultimately such forgetting is humanly impossible. We might think that we are being helpful and comforting by telling someone to forgive and forget. But we are actually saddling them with a huge burden and an impossible demand.

The recent public outcry over the huge bonuses paid to the executives of insurance giant AIG is another example of how difficult it is for people to "just forgive and forget." AIG was so mismanaged that it had to receive billions in federal bailout money to keep it solvent. But when the public found out that the very executives who had mismanaged this company got bonuses, they were not about to forgive and forget. Outraged, they demanded action. Congress responded by imposing a huge retroactive tax on the bonuses. The people demanded their pound of flesh and got it.

"Forgive and forget" seems most difficult in the context of family life. Try to tell children to forgive and forget after they have just had a bitter disagreement. They can't simply

forgive and forget, because they have got to keep living every day under the same roof with this person whose very presence continues to remind them that "Johnny stole my teddy bear!"

Try to tell a wife or a husband to forgive and forget when their spouse has been unfaithful to them. A grievous betrayal has been committed. If the marriage meant anything, the sin cannot simply be forgotten. To forget means that those marriage vows were not that important. The hurt cannot simply be forgotten. The wounded spouse has a right to her pound of flesh, and a right to make her spouse pay. To simply forgive and forget makes a mockery of their marriage and belittles the depth of their pain.

If there was ever anyone who had every right to get back and get even, get his pound of flesh and make his demands for justice, it was the prophet Jeremiah, from whose book today's first reading is taken.

Jeremiah had dared to speak against the establishment. Contrary to the official prophets on the payroll of the king, Jeremiah warned of the coming doom because Israel had been so unfaithful.

Because Jeremiah had dared to speak out, the defenders and protectors of the establishment had him arrested and imprisoned. Locked in public stocks, he was mocked and beaten by his enemies. They could not bear to hear the truth of what they had done and what God was going to do to them.

Now, Jerusalem was falling. The Babylonian hordes had descended from the north. The walls of the city had been breached. The temple was burning. The king had been captured and along with other leaders had been led away in chains to the Babylonian captivity.

You would think that Jeremiah would have been delighted with the fate of his enemies. They were getting what they deserved.

However, then he does something utterly strange. He takes what little money he has left and purchases a piece of land outside Jerusalem. How crazy is this? At a time when everyone else was selling, trying to abandon ship and get out of town with whatever money they still could get, Jeremiah does just the opposite. In the midst of destruction he bets on the future. He invests in the land that everyone else was abandoning.

Then he utters the remarkable words of today's first reading. Here in the midst of the shattering of the old covenant of Sinai, Jeremiah promises that God is going to make a new covenant. Unlike the old covenant written on tablets of stone, stone that could be broken and shattered, this new covenant will be written on people's hearts. As a result, they will *want* to keep it. They won't have to be continually told to shape up. It will be a *get to* instead of a *have to*, because God "will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

In the surprising forgiveness of this new covenant we see a foreshadowing of the same kind of forgiveness God worked in Jesus and continues to work among us today. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God forgives the sins of the world. But this forgiving is not forgetting!

God is not some sleepy old man in the sky who is oblivious to our sins. God is not like some enabling parent who always overlooks the alcohol abuse of his teenager. God is not happy with our sin, our betrayals, and our violence. But God loves us. God will not just look the other way and pretend that these things never happen. Someone must pay. Someone must suffer the consequences.

When Jeremiah decides to use his own money to buy a piece of land and redeem it from the ownership of the Babylonians, he demonstrates the essence of the new covenant. God forgives not

by forgetting but by choosing to remember Israel's sin in a new way.

What Jeremiah did is what God would do for us in Christ. Instead of holding our sins against us and making us pay, God bites his tongue. God bites the bullet. God chooses to give up his right to get his pound of flesh from us. God pays, sacrifices, and suffers. God is the one who bleeds. God gets his pound of flesh—from himself, from his “only begotten Son,” Jesus dies for us, suffering punishment intended for us and in exchange offering us forgiveness and new life.

Every time we begin our worship with the rite of confession and forgiveness, Jeremiah's new covenant is reestablished. Our sins are not forgotten. God remembers them. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” We remember them. “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” But, then we are told the glorious good news. God has chosen to remember them in a new way. The destruction we deserve God has turned into good. How? He “has given His Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins.”

God does not forget our sins but remembers our sins in a new way. God does not hold them against us. God forgives us.

When we believe this amazing promise, everything changes. We forgive those who have wronged us. We don't forget what has happened, but we choose to remember the wrongs in a new way. We no longer hold them against those who hurt us. Instead, we join God in breaking the painful and deadly cycle of getting back and getting even that so torments this world of ours.

Several years ago an incident happened on TV's “American Idol” that illustrated so well that forgiveness is not forgiving and forgetting.

A young woman named Mandisa was a contestant on the show. Judge Simon Cowell made several derisive comments about Mandisa's weight. Finally Mandisa told Cowell, "What I want to say to you is that, yes, you hurt me and I cried and it was painful, it really was. But I want you to know that I've forgiven you and that you don't need someone to apologize in order to forgive somebody. I figure that if Jesus could die so that all of my wrongs could be forgiven, I can certainly extend that same grace to you."

Such forgiveness can do great things. Mandisa did not just forgive and forget. The pain was real. It could not just be forgotten and shoved under the carpet. Nevertheless, Jesus' forgiveness of her enabled her to forgive Simon. She would bite the bullet, she would give up her right to get back and get even, she would remember his sin in a new way and no longer hold it against him.

Such forgiveness can change people. Simon told Mandisa that he was "humbled," and he apologized to her.

This is the new kind of life that the new covenant makes possible. Such forgiveness is not something we gotta do or else. That was life under the old covenant. Under the new covenant such forgiveness is a gift through which we can partner with God through Jesus in redeeming the world. What the world and people like Simon Cowell meant for humiliation and ridicule, we can change and transform into goodness and life. By refusing to demand our pound of flesh, by refusing to get back by getting even, but instead choosing to bite the bullet, to turn the other cheek, to be generous, to love our enemies, to be merciful as our Father is merciful, and to forgive but not forget, a new world begins to take shape in the midst of the old. The Kingdom of God begins to arrive. And what the world meant for evil, God has transformed into good.

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There—did you hear it? God's deadly diagnosis matters. Why? Because when we realize how deeply we are in trouble, we are even more amazed by what God did in Christ and what comfort that is for our lives. I once heard the Christian rock group Lost And Found put it like this: "If the good news is not good news, then the good news is not the good news."

Thanks be to God. Because of the crucified and risen Christ, it is good news.