Book Review: DOCTORED. The Disillusionment of an American Physician

Being busy with other things, we had no idea that the book you'll read about today was making a splash until we heard it about it from today's contributor, Phil Kuehnert. For a sample of the attention that *Doctored* is getting elsewhere, see the recent reviews in the New York Times and the Boston Globe, both of which will set you up to appreciate the greater depth that Phil brings to his discussion of it. That he does so will surprise no one who heard his presentation at the Crossing conference last January. The topic then was The Christian Chaplain in a Pluralistic Society. You'll find him bringing a similar sharpness of sympathy and analysis to the matters at issue here.

Phil's personal physician, who also names Christ as Lord, has written his own review of this book. We'll send you that next week on the safe assumption that you'll find it equally intriguing.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

DOCTORED
The Disillusionment of an American Physician
By Sandeep Jauhar
268 pages. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $26.

Reviewed by Philip Kuehnert

When I read Ivan Illich's *Medical Nemesis* in the early 1980's, I was under the influence of a young cardiologist and his wife, a pulmonologist, who with their two young children had joined the congregation that I was serving in Atlanta. In their effort to bring me into the world of culture—music, literature, and even theology, through books like Joachim Jeremias' classic *The Parables of Jesus*—their recommendation of Illich's book was not a surprise, but what was stunning was its prophetic note. Jauhar Sandeep's new memoir, *Doctored: The Disillusionment of an American Physician*, is no less prophetic in a way that Illich's book eerily predicted.

I have long been under the influence of physicians, from time to time under their direct care. In at least one instance, my death was postponed significantly (42 years, six months, five days and counting) because of a surgical team at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. I have worshipped and adored physicians.

Possibly because I was a celebration baby, the live birth that followed my sister Paula Hope's still birth, I was given a special place in the family. Paula Hope's tombstone in the church cemetery was always visible from the living room of the parsonage where the family gathered twice a day for devotions. Even when we moved to another congregation, the story of Paula Hope's death was always just a page turn or two away: "prefect pregnancy….the Sister came in and said 'Come and baptize your baby'….she was perfectly formed……blue…..lying face down with two large hypodermic needles stuck in her back….I told the sister, 'she's dead'….the sister insisted saying 'there is still life in the body.'" Then later I heard that "the cord was around the neck" and the nurse on duty was not experienced. It was decades later that I heard that our family physician, an alcoholic, was too drunk that night to come to the hospital.

Now, more than half a century later, I look back on decades of doctoring, from my sister’s nine-month hospitalization for anorexia complicated by a psychotic breakdown, to my father’s open-heart surgery—at age 89—to implant a pig’s valve to replace his aortic valve, to my brother’s successful experimental treatment for hairy cell leukemia, to my oldest brother’s last three years of life as a patient of the Heart Failure Clinic of Touro Infirmary in New Orleans, to my wife’s womanly surgeries nine years apart, to my own cardiac catheterization resulting in four ablations three months ago, to the weekly monitoring of my defibrillator/pacemaker. But few that I know in my age category are doctored any less. I don’t know of anyone who is not taking medicine, who does not have at least one specialist, and most have several. Those who work and serve in close communities of education, chaplaincy, or ministry have first-hand knowledge of how doctored we are. All my age (b. 1944) have their Medicare *and* supplemental insurance.

And most have some first-hand knowledge, not just about being a patient, but also about the delivery of health services. My wife ended her 43-year nursing career as a nurse practitioner, being the only mid-level provider on the staff of seven pediatricians at a large private clinic in Alaska. More than likely, someone in your family, an uncle or aunt, sibling, child, niece, or nephew, has a career in health care.

We can forgive Sandeep Jauhar’s whiney prose, because we have read enough and have listened to enough first-hand accounts to know that when he writes about the challenges of providing health care in the “mid-life of American health care” he is not exaggerating. The Affordable Health Care Act and the polemics that it has spawned lie at the center of the current debate about how best to provide health care to the entire population. Rarely a week goes by without yet another issue being raised about the adequacies or the inadequacies of the Act. We “know” that everybody is unhappy, and Jauhar tells us in great detail why he is unhappy. And perhaps that is why this book has such a dark cloud hanging over it. In mid-book, in an angry confrontation with his father after antidepressants have been recommended for his mother, his father says: “Antidepressants make you happy?….You think a medication will change her basic nature? Like you, she is not a happy person.” Mmm…father knows best? Maybe “without joy” is a better way to describe Dr. Jauhar’s life.

What *Doctored* provides is a well-written, finely-edited memoir that places the author’s experience in the context of the general milieu of cardiac medical practice. In addition to breathtaking personal accounts of his own struggles as an attending physician at a large teaching hospital in metropolitan New York City, Long Island Jewish Medical Center, the author provides the results of extensive research to document the demise of physician pay, morale, satisfaction, and respect. It is the last which in his own experience stands in such contrast to his grandfather’s esteemed place as a physician in India. His parents (his father is a frustrated plant geneticist) insisted that both he and his older brother become physicians because of their perceived exalted status of physicians. Hence, the word “disillusioned” in the subtitle of the book.

But who isn’t disillusioned about one’s health? Who isn’t “doctored?” And there are few people who could not repeat at least one horror story about medical treatment that went wrong. Hip replacements are bad enough, but when people outlive the life expectancy of the artificial hip, or when a patient is reactive to the titanium in the implant, or when a hospital-hosted infection requires weeks of infusion of antibiotics, just this one procedure carries with it great risk. Yet, for orthopedic surgeons and for physical therapists, and for the manufacturers of artificial hips, and for the pharmaceutical companies that make the drugs, living longer drives their market! And who, honestly, is not disillusioned that this sack of worms to which we were consigned inexorably gets weaker and sicker?

Living longer and living poorly is the where Crossings' Level One diagnosis congeals into a "yes, that's it." Living longer and living poorly are defined primarily socially and economically. And so we are "doctored." In fact doctoring is demanded. And in many developed countries, doctoring is provided for all. It has been long established, even before Michael Moore's movie *Sicko*, that there was something wrong with health care delivery in the United States. Dr. Jauhar feels that the golden age of American medicine—from the end of World War II to sometime in the sixties—ended with the proliferation of HMO's in response to the greed of physicians. Paralleling his own midlife process/crisis is the midlife process/crisis of American medicine, and that puts him in the middle of Crossings' Level Two diagnosis.

Internally, the almost parochial world of this first-generation Indian immigrant becomes the center of his malady. An almost "Cain-like" relationship with his successful older brother (also a cardiologist), the incessant attempt of his pulmonologist father-in-law (also an immigrant from India) to help his daughter and son-in-law both financially and spiritually, Jauhar's realization of how deeply he has disappointed his parents, and the never-ending carousel of colleagues, mostly foreign nationals, create a vortex of avarice, manipulation, despair, betrayal, and hopelessness. And if all this were not enough, primary in his memoir are his very sick heart-failure patients. He writes, "heart failure is the common final pathway for a host of cardiac diseases." Heart failure leads to death usually within two years of diagnosis. His metrics for success with his patients were noble, initially; to wit, "I wanted to develop close relationships with critically ill patients and provide long-term care.” But as he described his interview for his first job as an attending physician—creating a heart failure unit for Long Island Jewish Medical center—those noble aims were already being overshadowed by his promise to “decrease lengths of stay, improve hospital performance measures, improve the discharge process, decrease readmissions, install a computerized database, enroll patients in clinical trials, write emergency room protocols, and start an intravenous infusion.”

And on the most personal level, as he discloses his innermost doubts and struggles, this is a man who lives under perpetual judgment, not only by his preening older brother, his parents and in-laws, but most damningly by his wife who insists on a lifestyle whose financing demands $2,000 more than his monthly income. The “disillusionment” in the subtitle is a theme that runs strongly not only with his chosen profession, but also with himself.

The distance from this book to the cross is at the same time immeasurable and immediate. If the judgment of God would be unleashed on this system and on this doctor, nothing less than an Old Testament rant would be acceptable. Greed, hubris, and envy in the most egregious forms surface personally in Dr. Jauhar and in the medical professionals he relates to. And while I hope it is not just because of my self-righteous nature, I have described this book to others variously as empty, sick, disgusted, disturbed and hopeless. And bordering on the sacrilegious is the hubris of this line in the closing chapter: “But medicine holds the key to its own redemption.” His basis for this hope? He tells story of an intern who returns to medicine as a second career at the age of 46, in spite of significant health problems. Then this: “What redeems the effort? It’s the tender moments helping people in need. In the end, medicine is about taking care of people in their most vulnerable state and making yourself a bit of the same in the process."

So who will speak the Word of promise to Dr. Jauhar and his colleagues? Surely there must be confessing Christians who intersect with his world. There was no indication that the Christian message has touched him in any meaningful way—no references to chaplains, pastors, priests. He and his physician assistant did attend a funeral of one of their patients, but there was no indication that it was in any way Christian. His father-in-law, a devotee of various gurus, invited Jauhar and his wife to his home when they hosted Guruji and his followers with the hope that Jauhar would find peace. Rather, he found the whole ordeal to be exhausting and "a wash." But then, as he was leaving, a disciple of the Guruji gave him this piece of advice: "Once you know and accept you are going to die, the future will not haunt you."

In contrast are writers and theologians like David Novak (Jewish) and Stanley Hauerwas (sectarian Christian) who have written extensively and at times prophetically about medicine, the health delivery system and the role that theology, synagogue, and church play in health. Their perspectives would provide a most interesting counterpoint to Jauhar's book.

Having been "doctored enough" and having been, at times, on both ends of Dr. Jauhar's assertion that "most people think of doctors as either consumedly avaricious or impossibly altruistic," my experience with doctors has been for the most part quite different from Sandeep Jauhar's picture of the medical profession. All three of my primary care physicians, beginning in 1994 in Alaska, were men who genuinely cared about their profession and their patients. Yet all three of them have changed their mode and place of practice. My first, an internist, left the clinic where he was doing primary care and became a hospitalist. The second, also in Alaska, had done a tour as a doctor in Cameroon, then worked for years in Barrow, Alaska (find that on the map!) before moving to Fairbanks. The third, my present physician, began in the Navy, then for several years was in a private practice with other physicians in North Carolina before moving to Williamsburg, where he is part of a large hospital and clinic system. I have had the privilege of being part of the same worshiping community with the last two. All three did extensive first-visit interviews and all have been careful with referrals. All three have been conservative (rather than aggressive) in their treatment and prescriptions. All have at times made critical and excellent referrals for special issues.

Sandeep Jauhar joins Ivan Illich, Michael Moore, critics of the Affordable Care Act, and a host of others who are only too glad to say what's wrong with American health care in general. The truth is that none of us gets out alive. Unless the transformative power of the Gospel changes the paradigm for health, we are consigned to go with the flow in the search for the fountain of youth. Against that search stands the great challenge of 2 Corinthians 5:17, to accept the reality that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." This has profound implications for the individual's view of herself or himself as a healthy or sick person, and for the community that sustains the sick and the well.

Tracking Guardians of the Galaxy

This week we bring you a piece by Peter Keyel, an immunologist and Crossings Board member whose most recent contribution to Thursday Theology was an essay on theological resonances in *The Hobbit*. This week he returns to the well of popular culture, this time by applying the Crossings concept of Tracking to the recent action movie *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Crossings uses a six-step matrix to examine Biblical texts for words of Law and Gospel. That matrix is applied in three phases: to a Biblical text (Grounding), to a real issue in someone's life (Tracking), and then to both at once, comparing the two to identify both Law and Gospel in life (Crossing). Although easy in theory, application takes some practice, especially Tracking and Crossing. Tracking, the second phase, critically examines a "slice of life" from someone's story. This phase can get very personal very fast as we ask the same hard, critical questions that we would of a Biblical text—not just Step 1, "What is the surface problem?" but also Step 2, "What is the deeper, heart problem?" and Step 3, "What is the God problem?" Even in just asking these questions, we tend to evoke defensiveness and a need to justify oneself. The Old Adam or Eve that lives within each of us resists the accusing Word of God's Law. In so many conversations, we raise walls of defensiveness and misdirection to shut down the conversation and prevent us from hearing God's Word of Law. This is not surprising, given the desolation that one faces in Step 2 and especially Step 3. Tragically, in refusing to face God’s Law, we also shut ourselves away from the Good News that God in Christ has reconciled us to Him. To overcome this defensiveness and self-righteousness, one common approach is to try hammering and battering at those walls of defensiveness that others raise, as though we can break through by dint of arms. This only makes things worse. Is there a better way?

One alternative approach for Tracking—bringing our real, human problem out into the open—comes from Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments. Two examples from the Old Testament are 2 Samuel and Jonah. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan applies God’s Law to David. However, he does so by engaging David in a Tracking exercise that dodges the walls of defensiveness David would almost certainly raise. In Jonah 4, God uses a worm and bush to similar effect on Jonah. I don’t know anyone who can create worms and bushes like God, and I suspect that like me, many people lack the ability to come up with a perfectly fitting parable right on the spot like Nathan. Thankfully, we don’t need to do either of these things, because we have many tools already at our disposal. Along with Scripture, from which we can pull texts and parables for our Grounding phase, we also have professional storytellers to assist with the Tracking phase. The success of these storytellers often rests on their ability to connect with an audience emotionally. This connection relies on shared experiences that are usually already “translated” into local cultural understandings. Additionally, one subset of these stories, movies, are widely distributed and readily accessible to many people, and they appeal directly to people who might otherwise not be interested in Tracking, Crossings, or anything linked to theology. All of these aspects make movies good proxies for Tracking individual people.

When one identifies strongly with a movie character, Tracking that character becomes a way of Tracking one’s life in a “safer” manner. This helps us avoid the risk of presenting our human hearts overtly to those Tracking with us. The first Grounding phase and final Crossing phase can also end up as more than just practice when applied to movies—even movies that have nothing ostensibly to do about religion. Since the Crossing phase is helping a sinner see how all six steps in the Crossings matrix—both the accusing parts and the Good News of the Gospel—connect in their life, movies become a conduit carrying the life-saving Gospel.

Guardians of the Galaxy is a recent exemplar of a non-religious movie that can serve as a conduit for the Gospel. Although the villain is ostensibly a religious fanatic, religion does not play a role in the lives of any of the protagonists, who are the best targets for Tracking. This lack of religion helps set the stage for identifying with real-life situations, where God and "organized religion" may seem quite distant. However, despite the movie's apparent distance from theology, it contains a wealth of material for practicing Tracking and thus setting the stage for a Law-and-Gospel-grounded conversation. And it's a good action movie to boot. One particular gift in *Guardians of the Galaxy* is that, unlike other Marvel movies, the protagonists are "outlaws," which in practice translates simply to sinners. They are people who, while generally alien in appearance, possess very understandable and readily identifiable motives, desires, and needs. One powerful aspect of this movie is that it lays bare the emotions and desires of the Guardians—a move that corresponds with Step 2 in the Crossings matrix. It also goes further to illustrate how these sinful emotions and desires all lead to death (Step 3), and how the Guardians respond after facing death (Step 6). Each of the Guardians can be individually Tracked, which would make for a great group activity, since they span a reasonable range of sin. Much as repentance in the Old Testament does not overtly involve Jesus' death and resurrection, the repentance present in this movie also avoids overt God-talk or deep examination of the changes that each character undergoes (Steps 4 and 5), though near-death experiences certainly figure heavily into most of them. Thus, the movie provides a large amount of starting material, but also leaves a crucial hole at the most important steps.

<seriously, lots=”” of=”” spoilers=”” in=”” this=”” next=”” paragraph=””>
As one example of this bounty, I will Track one of the Guardians, Drax, the Destroyer. His surface problem in the movie is the loss he suffered when Ronan murdered his family. He misses them and wants revenge against Ronan. To that end, he wants to destroy Ronan and everything associated with Ronan, provoking his attempt to kill Gamora, one of Ronan’s associates, in prison. His grief over losing his loved ones blinds him to his compatriots’ plights and most other things around him. His single-minded lust for revenge leads him sacrifice everything to get a chance to kill Ronan. When it becomes clear that his compatriots are successfully hiding from Ronan, he chooses to betray them and the safety of the Infinity Stone by summoning Ronan to their secret location. The great part about Marvel movies is that we get to see the results of this single-minded focus on revenge as a coping strategy for grief. Ronan beats Drax nearly to death and throws him in a vat of spinal fluid to drown. The consequences of Drax’s choices are thus very clear. Being in a superhero movie, Drax of course survives this loss because he is pulled from the vat before he fully drowns by the very friends he betrayed. It is only after his defeat, and rescue by his friends, that Drax is repentant. He realizes what his bondage to his grief and his idol of revenge have cost both him and the others with him. Because of this, he is willing to face Ronan again, not to kill him for revenge, but to stop him from killing an entire planet. He does this, knowing that he will likely die in the attempt, but free of his idol. Unlike the

other steps, what drives him through repentance and on to Step 6 is not clear in the movie. However, it seems clear that he willingly does so with his friends because his heart has changed, not because he has found a new law or a new set of rewards to pursue. Even after Ronan is defeated, we get a picture of Drax, very much a sinner-saint: at the end he asks Nova Corps law enforcement (= Law) whether it is lawful to kill and does not accept or understand their answer of no. This makes it clear that the Old Adam lives yet inside him.

Aside from Tracking, the other phases of the Crossings method are Grounding and Crossing. I encourage readers to practice choosing Grounding texts and then Crossing that chosen text with the Tracking laid out in the last paragraph. Even better would be sharing those choices with the rest of the Community.

Good News for the Disconnected?

Colleagues,

I. Today's date calls to mind the evil that still rages in the world, as it always has. I've been listening of late to a pair of brilliant podcasts about the histories of Rome and Byzantium. They remind me that the wrath and ruin visited on New York and Washington thirteen years ago is as nothing compared to the incessant horrors endured by others in ages pasts. Have you heard of the sack of Antioch in 540 A.D.? Probably not. The tale gets buried in the mountain of like episodes that sin has heaped up, each terrible beyond words to contemplate when you try donning the skin of someone who was there. Now ISIS stalks where the Persians once did. Already lurking in the shadows of centuries to come is an endless line of others equally bent on power, plunder, and blood.We who aim in such a world to speak of Gospel had better bear in mind that unless the “good news” we’re talking about is God-sized stuff, we’re spouting drivel. Peace and justice projects toyed with at leisure in safe suburban congregations are not the Church’s vocation. To imply otherwise—am I the only one who hears that implication, and all too frequently?—is to mock the Church’s vocation, and the God who has called us to it. Grievously, it also relegates some billions of corpses to the dust and ashes that consumed them when the evildoers stormed through. To me that seems heartless. It begs for a prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit,” and with the praying, perhaps, a large bucket of water thrown squarely in the face, icy cold enough to jolt us awake and remind us what our calling in baptism is truly about.

We’re in the impossibility business. We tout what slaves of the possible will regard as drivel, like the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. Driving the tout is the astonishment that Ron Neustadt put his finger on so neatly last week, namely that mercy has trumped justice as God’s bedrock principle for solving the problem of sin. Thus Easter, and the Gospel it trumpets. Easter, of course, is the Ur-Impossibility, so to speak. But we are nothing if not Easter people, addicted to dreams of things that cannot and will not be, except that an impossibly Trinitarian God should authorize them and make them so.

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II. Thanks to Peter Keyel, who keeps the Crossings Facebook page current, I stumbled yesterday across my quote for the week, if not the month:“If you are a pastor and preacher, and no one ever accuses you of preaching antinomianism, then you are not faithfully preaching the gospel given to St Paul.”
   That comes from a 2013 blog post entitled “Cheap Grace, Costly Grace, and the Justification of the Ungodly.” It’s by one Aidan (Alvin) Kimel, an Orthodox priest who started off as an Anglican, then dallied for a time with the Roman Catholics. It’s well worth the read.

III. With that I come to the day’s chief offering, a sermon that attempts to tout the impossible in the hearing of some folks who would seem, over the years, to have kept a studious distance from the Church’s crazy talk. The occasion was a recent funeral, yours truly as preacher. Half the extended family was about as unchurched as unchurched can be. I had to assume going in that they didn’t know the Great Story or standard Christian vocabulary. There was even so that Promise to tell, and that crucified Christ to anchor it in. So I tried. How well or poorly it came out I’m not prepared to say. I dare to pass it along anyway because the challenge of that audience is one that all of us are bound increasingly to face, whether officially as preachers (in the case of some), or more frequently and unofficially as friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbors who get called upon from time to time to account for “the hope that is in you” (1 Pe. 3:15). Again, the question: how do you talk crazy-good to folks whose imaginations have never been stretched, not really, beyond the constraints of that which can be? May the effort here help you to think, critique, spot ways to do it better, and, when your turn comes around, to inject a stony mind with a hint of hope in God.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

At a recent funeral, held in a church. The readings were Psalm 23, 1 Corinthians 13, and John 14:1-6—

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On a certain Sunday every year we at Messiah invite members of the church to fill out a little form for pastors to use when the day comes to sit down with family members and plan their funeral.

For people who aren't used to church this will sound a bit morbid, I suppose. Death is something we don't like to think about too much, especially not our own death. The world we live in every day does its best to pretend death away. It celebrates life, and that's a good thing. It celebrates youthful life in particular—and there, I think, it goes overboard. If the only information I had about America was the information I gleaned from the TV shows they make in America, I'd have to assume that 90% of Americans are young and beautiful and smart beyond their years. It's not that way, of course. Most of us are not so pretty, and all of us come down at some point with wrinkles and gray hair; and it's only when those wrinkles show up that you start to realize how dumb you were when you were still in your twenties. If we valued wisdom in our culture we'd wear our wrinkles like badges of honor. Instead we're pushed to hide them. It's not just that wrinkles are not so pretty. They're also a bit scary. They announce to the world that every life has got to end.

One of the gifts of going to church is the gift of being pushed not to hide things but to face them squarely. That’s one reason for this annual exercise at Messiah of filling out that funeral form. Not everyone does it, but Diana did. She knew this day would come—the one we’re at right now, I mean—and part of getting ready for it was putting together another little gift for those of you she would leave behind. The gift in this case is that set of passages from the Bible that you heard just now. It’s also the hymns—the songs—that we’re using at this service. If you haven’t done so yet, I’d encourage you to open up the books and follow along. What you’ll find there are words and thoughts and prayers and, above all, some incredible promises that were tremendously important to your mother, your grandma, your friend. They helped to make her tick; to get up every morning and put her feet on the ground, one after the other; to do that even in those moments when she was drowning in sorrow because Roger had died, or gasping for breath because her lungs weren’t working the way lungs are supposed to.

Diana never stopped hoping for the future, a fantastic future, in fact. These words will tell you where that hope came from. They’ll tell you too where she got the wisdom that came with her wrinkles. It’s a genuine wisdom, and a useful wisdom too—useful in the sense that you can put it to use for the sake of the people around you. It’s the wisdom of trusting God.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” I won’t always be needy, that is—gasping for breath, say; aching for the person I’ve lost and can’t ever bring back.

We’ll hear these words again at the graveside. They do as good a job as any of capturing the great hope that kept Diana going.

God is for me. He’s on my side. I matter to him, and I matter profoundly. So he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He’ll go so far as to resurrect my body, to bring it to life in a form that will leave me gasping not for breath, but for wonder. So with this in mind, with God at my side, why ever should I fear the valley of death that every human creature is bound to tumble into. On the other side there stands a table, a banquet table of the kind you find in the palaces of kings. On it is a place marker that bears my name. The feasting is grand, and the cup of joy is never empty. For now the God of goodness and mercy keeps dogging my heels, so determined he is to get me where he wants me. Where is it he wants me? At home with him forever—not floating around in some kind of vague, spiritual ether, but vividly and physically, as real as real can be. That’s the promise that Diana said Amen to. Amen is nothing more than fancy way of saying “For sure.” Amen and amen. That’s “absolutely for sure.”

Now, there’s nothing new about these words. They’ve been loose in the world for at least 3,000 years. They don’t get the play or the credibility in America that they did when Diana was young. Back then the culture was somewhat predisposed to take them seriously, and lots of people went so far as to learn them by heart, but that, of course, has changed—dramatically, it seems to me. There are lots of reasons behind the change. One of them, I suspect, is the world’s guilty conscience, the sense that nobody, but nobody, is good enough to deserve what the words promise. And with it comes the accurate suspicion that nobody wants to be good enough to deserve what the words promise. To be that good would mean, of course, not having fun. I don’t say that at all flippantly. Truth is that life as we know it is short—and the older you get, the more you realize how short life is. And we’d like to enjoy it. But where’s the pleasure in being so good that you spend the whole of your life on other people and never on yourself? How else does a person earn a place at the table that those old words talk about?

Better that we should forget about it altogether and go about our days as if it can’t be true.

Or you can do what Diana did, and not just Diana, but Roger as well, and countless people before them. What you do, that is, is to pay attention to another set of words from God, words in this case that are focused squarely on that person most all of us have heard something about along the line, Jesus Christ is his name. Come to think of it, it’s still impossible in America to miss out altogether on hearing about this person, if only because people bark out his name when they’re feeling frustrated, or disgusted. I’m not sure why, but that’s what they do.

We also catch his name at the major holiday called Christmas. The marvel of that holiday is the way it underscores what Jesus was and is about. The word is giving. Undeserved giving. No parent in their right mind buys presents on the basis of how much the children have earned. Instead we give good things because we want to give them; because we love our children; because we want to see their faces come alive with happiness and delight. Diana took huge delight in seeing that look in the faces of all of you, her dearest ones. She told me so.

God’s aim with all of us is to see our faces come alive with joy in him. To make that happen he gives us not what we deserve, nor even what we think we want. Instead he gives us what we need. What we need, of course, is someone good enough and strong enough to break the hold of selfishness and sin and death on every human heart and mind.

There were shepherds in the field one night—you may have heard the story. They were gross and dirty men, the total losers of the day, dying creatures lost in darkness. “To you is born a Savior,” God’s messenger said; and he sent them to go see Jesus.

The Son of God, God’s gift for them.

The passage I read before I started features this same Jesus, now a man, a man about to die in fact. The enemies have laid their plot. They’ll arrest him this very night, and tomorrow they’ll kill him.

And on this very night, there sits Jesus at a table with a little band of followers. They’re a so-so mix of men. Not a one of them would pass the kind of goodness test that counts for anything with God.

“I’m going,” Jesus says, “to make a home for you; a place for you in my Father’s house. A seat for you at the everlasting banquet table you’ve heard about.”

“Trust me,” Jesus says. “Trust me to get you where God wants you to be, and where you’d like to be as well if only you had the nerve to imagine it.”

Later that night these men he’s talking to will take for the hills with their tails between their legs, leaving Jesus to his fate. Does that stop him from loving them? And on that day called Easter, when God raises Jesus from the dead, does their stupidity, their disloyalty, their appalling cowardice—does any of this keep Jesus from tracking these men down to bring them back to life with God? It doesn’t. Not for a moment.

Was there anything Diana ever did or didn’t do that was grievous enough to shut down the gush of God’s love for her in Christ? There wasn’t. And what was true of her, is true of you as well. She wanted you to hear that. Her Christ, her Savior, is your Savior too. If you’ll let him be, that is.

“In my Father’s house are many rooms,” Jesus says. “I have each of you in mind for one of them.” The time has come for Diana to discover how serious Jesus is and was and always will be about all his promises, and this one in particular. Is he beaming with delight as he leads her to the door of the room that has her name on it? Well, of course he is. As for Diana, there is joy, a joy that fills her brand new lungs with life, her spirits with a rush of thanks and praise that will not stop because it simply can’t, it won’t. It’s just that good, that true, that real, and on and on it goes forever.

How else can you react, except with thanks and praise like this, when you’re finally face to face with the Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things?

This Love—the Love of God, that is, Christ Jesus is his name—is waiting with arms wide open for all of us, and more to the point, for each of you, the ones Diana loved the best. And that’s finally what Diana, so wise and lively, wanted all of you to hear today.

“Trust him,” she would say. “Trust him well, trust him always, spend your days with hope and courage, no matter what may come—and let him bring you home.”

God grant it. Amen.

What Happens on the Cross? An Interchange and Conversation,

Part 2

Colleagues,

Last week we sent you a sharp response by Pr. Richard (Dick) Hoyer to a sermon we had shared with you two weeks earlier ("Why We Ordain," ThTheol 828; you might want to read that again before going further). In calling the response "sharp," I mean that in a double sense. First, Pr. Hoyer was unhappy, and he didn't mince words. Second, in spilling his unhappiness he sliced to the heart of the one issue, above all others, that useful servants of the Gospel have got to be alive to. I speak, of course, of the cross of Christ, and what happened there. Was that death of Jesus really necessary, and if so, how necessary? Did it do something to rearrange, in a fundamental way, the relationship between God and sinful humankind, or was it finally nothing more than a dramatic demonstration of a divine attitude that blind sinners might otherwise miss? (As a church sign puts it, "Smile! God Loves You!") The latter, as Pr. Hoyer pointed out, has emerged as the favored position in a significant segment of American Christianity, the one we used to know as "mainline." He thought the sermon he had read reflected that, and it pained him.

We forwarded Pr. Hoyer's comments to the sermon's author and preacher, Pr. Ron Neustadt. Today we send along his reaction. It's a remarkable piece; so remarkable that I've already stashed it in the digital basket where I keep things that bear regular re-reading as I try to stay on track in my own work as a pastor and ground-level theologian. Let me suggest two things in particular to watch for. First, if you've ever wondered what the problem may have been in the great Anselm of Canterbury's account of the cross, you'll see it laid it out here with a succinct clarity that no one I know of has managed to match.

This is something we all need to get a grip on. From clarity about Anselm comes clarity about the real problem that dogs today’s accounts of the Gospel (they are legion) that remain anchored in Anselm. And in the way Ron lays this out, you’ll also spot the gross deficiencies—the under-telling of the cross—that plagues most of Anselm’s critics, including ones that many of us rub shoulders with and are called to bear gentle and patient witness to.

This brings me to the second great “Bravo!” about Ron’s piece. It’s the way he writes it, with a generous and gentle regard for the stranger he’s responding to, however pointed that stranger may have been. Dick for his part will respond in kind, with a brief appreciation that you’ll find appended at the end of Ron’s letter. This, it seems to me, is a sterling model of the kind of interchange that faith-full servants of the Gospel will have with each other: honest, urgent, exuding passion for the vital things of Christ, yet carried out in the Spirit of Christ, in the assumption that the same Spirit is at work in the other. It becomes, in other words, a genuine conversation.

For having the nerve to show us what that looks like—and more, for consoling us all with the Gospel—our grateful thanks to Dick and Ron alike.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Dear Brother Richard,

Let me begin by assuring you that I give thanks for your willingness to express your theological concern. Our reconciliation with God is a matter of utmost importance so there is no topic more worthy of “mutual conversation,” to borrow the term from the Smalcald Articles.

Now, to address your dismay. Let me assure you that in no way do I wish to “dismiss the fact that ‘the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin’ (I John 1:70).” In fact, I think I affirm it in the sermon. Here’s how.

In the sermon, I stressed Jesus’ offer (promise) of forgiveness. That offer involved the shedding of blood (his blood), and that bloodshed was not merely coincidental with his offer of forgiveness. It was essential to his offer.

That is, Jesus’ blood was shed (as you pointed out), not because the Roman justice system put an innocent man to death nor because some Judeans had a vendetta against him, religious or otherwise, nor because it was “a sad mistake made by vengeful sinners.” But I never said it was because of any of those reasons.

Jesus’s blood was shed because the forgiveness of sins required it. Jesus’ offer of forgiveness and his crucifixion (bloodshed) necessarily go together. I do not think my sermon implied anything else.

Jesus’ offer of forgiveness and his crucifixion go together, though, *not* because God is unwilling to forgive sinners without getting God’s pound of flesh. Not at all. The facts are that for Christ to forgive sinners, he had to undergo what Luther called the “tyrant” which objects to sinners being forgiven at all, namely, the law, with its rightful claim on the sinner’s life. What gives the law its clout is its own divine authorization to object to forgiveness. A bookkeeping model (like Anselm’s) whereby both legal justice and divine mercy can both operate without conflict—with no remarkable duel (*mirabile duellum* was Luther’s term in his *Lectures on Galatians 1531*)—is unknown to Luther and, he thinks, unknown to the scriptures of both testaments. Legal justice and divine mercy come to a “settlement” in Anselm’s theology and both persist after Good Friday.

Luther’s “breakthrough,” as he called it, in reading the Bible was that God’s law and God’s gospel and their respective righteousnesses (performance and mercy) cannot be coordinated in a settlement. They *contradict* each other. Thus for Luther legal justice and divine mercy *clash* on Good Friday. This is the “remarkable duel.” On Easter Sunday we see which one is dead. In some theoretical speculative principle, justice and mercy might be coordinated. But on Good Friday—in actual human history—they were not. Not coordination, but conquest is the upshot of Christ’s being made a curse for us.

All of that (these last two paragraphs) is to say that, when I said “Christ offers us forgiveness,” I was not implying that reconciliation between God and us happens without the shedding of blood. In fact, just the opposite. Christ so identified with us, not just by virtue of his incarnation, but by virtue of placing himself where we were—under the “curse” of the law—and becoming not just a debtor but a rebel against God’s own law by his offer (promise) of forgiveness, that the shedding of his blood was inevitable. Such is the depth of God’s love for us (to use John’s key term, since the sermon text is from John).

When I say, “Our Savior came to offer us God’s forgiveness,” and, “He was killed because he made that offer,” I am not saying that he was killed only by human beings as you suggested I was. It was God’s own law that put him to death. (That, I realize now, I could have made more explicit, and your letter will help me keep that in mind for the future.)

So, yes, I agree with you and the writer of I John that it is only “the blood of Jesus his Son that cleanses us from all sin.”

(At least, I know of no other way.) But I do not think that what I said in the sermon implies otherwise.

I don't know if I have addressed your dismay. I hope I have. Again, I give thanks for your interest in wanting the theology of the cross to come through loud and clear in preaching. That is my interest, too.

Yours, in our Lord,
Ron

Thank you, Ron, for your gracious and instructive response. I rejoice in both the instruction and the grace.

What you say your sermon did not imply, I nevertheless inferred. Perhaps I read into it what was not there, and perhaps what you assumed was there was not explicit enough to be heard. My (our?) homiletics prof told me never to assume that people already know the gospel and need not have it repeated. Always proclaim it! Explicitly.

I am glad that not only am I not "running in vain," but that we are running together.

Dick

What Happens on the Cross? An

Interchange and Conversation Part 1

Colleagues,

In Part III of the Smalcald Articles, Luther lists what others would call “means of grace,” or as Luther puts it himself, ways by which the Gospel “offers counsel and help against sin.” There are five of these, he says: the spoken word, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the power of the keys, and “the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren” (SA III.iv, Tappert).

This week and next we send you a splendid example of what the last of these is about. You’re going to see a conversation between two pastors who didn’t know each other when the talking began. What launched it was a surprising response to a recent post that we thought would gladden hearts and put smiles on faces all around. It came from Pastor Richard Hoyer, who sent us an open letter to Pastor Ron Neustadt about the sermon he preached on August 9 at the ordination of Candice Stone (ThTheol 828). As you’ll see today, Pr. Hoyer was less than happy with what he saw there. He cares profoundly for the Gospel. It seemed to him that the cross of Christ had been under-preached, and he dared to say so. His reasoning is instructive, and it’s worth a careful look.

Now, as a rule, the world being the sinful mess it is, one would expect a critique like this to provoke an angry, defensive response. But knowing a little of Pr. Neustadt, we guessed at a different outcome, and sent him the letter, and got what we had guessed at. You’ll see that next week. And there too you’ll be instructed, not only in matters Christological, but also in the look of pastoral integrity and the sound of faith acting in love, and not only on Pr. Neustadt’s end of things, but on Pr.

Hoyer’s too. Good and blessed things can happen when brothers and sisters talk candidly in the strength of Christ and his Spirit. Through conversation comes the consolation we all require. For that, thanks be to God.

Does it bear mentioning that Pastors Hoyer and Neustadt were taught how to preach by the same great teacher, Richard Caemmerer? I think so; also that both have blessed us with Thursday Theology contributions over the past year or so. You’ll find their contribution here to be a special treat.

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

Dear Pastor,

I am dismayed by the theology in your sermon at the ordination of Pr. Candice Stone, recently published on Crossings’ Thursday Theology. It does not seem to me to reflect a “theology of the cross” at all. Indeed, it seems to me to negate it. In the spirit of St. Paul, who, with Barnabas, went to Jerusalem to talk with “acknowledged leaders” about the gospel he proclaimed, “in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain,” here’s my dismay. Am I running in vain?

It seems to me that there is a sort of theology du jour circulating, reacting to a theology of the cross which proclaims that our Lord, through the cross, accomplished our reconciliation with the Holy One. The reaction speaks in terms of rejecting a “blood theology,” accusing that theology of describing God as a “child abuser,” and even going so far as to call it “throwing red meat to an angry God.” Anselm’s theory of atonement gets dismissed with disdain in the process, throwing out not only the theory but also the fact of atonement (reconciliation) by the blood of the cross. Instead we hear only that the cross is a sort of visual aid to the message of his forgiving love. The cross doesn't accomplish anything, it only backs up what he tells us about God's forgiving love. The cross is not necessary, it is only sad.

I am dismayed because I hear in your sermon that distortion (as I see it) of the Gospel and rejection (as I see it) of a theology of the cross. It seems to me that you are saying that our Savior came (merely) to "offer us God's forgiveness." He was killed "because he made that offer." God raised him from death in order to back up God's offer of forgiveness.

As I hear you, you are telling us that Jesus didn't accomplish anything; he only showed us something. Anselm (who spoke of atonement) is wrong; Abelard (who said the cross only shows us how much God loves us) was right (this in spite of the church's historical judgment for Anselm).

Don't misunderstand; I'm not defending Anselm's theory. We can dismiss it if we must, but we dare not dismiss the fact that "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Like those who throw the baby out with the bathwater, the theology du jour (it seems to me), throws out the mystery of the atonement, the theology of the cross, with Anselm's watery theory. Does not a theology of the cross proclaim an atonement, a reconciliation with God, made by God himself, a mystery beyond explanation? Do you not distort that theology, yes, the Gospel itself, by making the cross merely a lynching by unhappy people who were threatened by his message? It seems that way to me, hence my dismay.

Does not the creed we have promised to uphold say "*crucifixus etiam pro nobis*"? He died "for us." He did not die simply because some people didn't like him.

Do we not say at every Eucharist, "… my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin"? For us! He shed his blood for our forgiveness! The cross was not merely a sad mistake made by vengeful sinners. Does not St. Paul write (in Romans 3:25), "…the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood…"? We sing it in the hymn, "God's own sacrifice complete"!

Does not the Apostle also say (in Romans 5:9), "Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God"?

One could go on and on: Eph. 1:7, 2:13, Col. 1:14, 20, 1 Peter 1:19, Heb. 9:22, etc.

Am I "running in vain?" Or are you preaching the theology du jour rather than of the cross? Help me out here. Ease my dismay.

The Rev. (emeritus) Richard O. Hoyer
7373 E 29th St. N
Wichita, KS 67226

A Rite for Labor Day

This week we're pleased to bring you a liturgical rite for the observance of Labor Day, written by Steve Kuhl, our Crossings Executive Director. As you'll see, Steve introduces his rite with some historical context, and he warmly invites you to use the rite in your own worship this weekend if you so choose.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

A Liturgical Observance of the Vocation of Daily Work for Labor Day
Liturgy and the Crossings Congregation

Back when I was a pastor at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, Bob Bertram sparked the idea in me to think about what it would mean for Mount Olive to be a “Crossings Congregation.” The idea was this: being a Crossings Congregation means that Crossings is not merely an add-on program, placed on top of the other things you do; rather, whether in the area of worship or education or pastoral care or church administration or social outreach, a Crossings Congregation is one that seeks to infuse the Crossings Concern into everything it does.

So I began to think first about worship. One of the weekly high points in the congregation’s life is worship. How might the Crossings Concern be infused into that regular activity? Of course, one of the “routine” ways for doing this is found in preaching that minds its Ds and Ps (the Law’s diagnosis of what ails the human situation and the Gospel’s prescription for healing it) in such a way that focuses the hearer on “crossing life with the Promise of Christ.” But I wondered: Might there not also be a more systematic way to connect everyday or secular life with the promise of Christ by paying attention to the everyday or secular calendar? Might not the themes of everyday life that confront us through the rhythm of the secular calendar also be incorporated into liturgical life, just as the themes in the drama of salvation—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—systematically confront us through the liturgical year?

So I began to think about all the ways we as a society have secular celebrations (Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Fourth of

July, etc.) that people are predisposed to observe, but which we as the Church often let pass by. Could they be infused with a meaningful, intentional, liturgical connection to the Christian Message? Finally, it dawned on me that they did have a connection! These secular observances coincide with what we as Christians call "vocations" or callings from God. Collectively, they identify those situations and activities in daily life that we as Christians regard, not as legal obligations, but as holy opportunities for living out our baptismal identity as "Little Christs" in the world: situations and activities wherein we "dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that God has made," as one of the Offertory Prayers in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (p. 68) puts it. Therefore, the liturgical life of the Church is a very appropriate place to remind and teach Christians about Christian vocation.

At Mount Olive, I began to lift up the connection of faith and life in the liturgy by creating rites that affirmed the vocation of Christians in the world as those vocations were suggested by the secular calendar. Below is a rite I developed for the observance of Labor Day. You are welcome to use it in the upcoming Labor Day Sunday, a rite that lifts up the vocation of daily work.

According to the US Department of Labor's website, the idea of Labor Day "constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country" (http://www.dol.gov/laborday/history.htm). It was first conceived by Matthew Maguire in 1882 while he served as the Secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. He had led several strikes in 1870s to bring public consciousness to the plight of manufacturing workers and the exploitative conditions under which American workers toiled. Daily work was being demeaned and devalued by the exploits of big business which valued capital accumulation over the worker who produced it. Labor Day, therefore, fit into the overall concern to promote dignity and justice for the common worker in a society that was rapidly moving from a family-farm agricultural economy to an industrial-based capitalist economy. Through parades and festivals, the day was designed to show "the strength and *esprit de corps* of the trade and labor organizations" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_Day) in their support of the value of daily work. In a bit of irony, Labor Day was declared a national holiday in 1894 by Grover Cleveland, six days after the end of the Pullman Strike, in the wake of the tragic death of strikers at the hands of the U.S. military that Cleveland himself sent to the company town of Pullman, Illinois, for the purpose of breaking the strike (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pullman_Strike). By 1909, Labor Sunday was established, as many churches began to show their support for the struggles of the common worker and the value and dignity of daily work. The prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer* that I use in the rite below was developed for this Labor Sunday observance.

Although Labor Day has devolved into an end-of-summer holiday, we would do well as the church to lift it up and to remember it as a day to celebrate and extol the value of daily work as a calling from God. The following rite is offered to that end.

AFFIRMATION OF CHRISTIAN VOCATION OF DAILY WORK – LABOR DAY

This Rite may be used as part of the sending rite of the liturgy, placed after the Post-communion prayer and before the Benediction.

Dear Christian friends: Baptized into the priesthood of Christ, we are called by the Holy Spirit to offer ourselves to the God of all creation in thanksgiving for what he has done and continues to do for us. There are many ways and places in which we as Christians offer ourselves to God in service. We call them vocations: callings from God to be God's servants. Some vocations are chosen; some just fall upon us, seemingly by accident; but no matter how these vocations come to us, they are to be viewed as opportunities for us to serve the Lord joyfully. On this Labor Day weekend, we lift up the vocation of daily work.

The creation stories in Genesis depict daily work as an integral part of God's relationship with humanity. Through daily work God dignifies us: calling us to participate in his ongoing work of blessing the creation so that it may be fruitful and multiply. Through the blessings of daily work God also provides for us: calling us to share with each other the fruits of our labor so that all may partake in the common good. Unfortunately, our daily work is often tainted by the reality of our own sin—our inclination to work for self alone and not for God and the common good—and it is frequently demeaned by the exploitation of systems that would rob workers of their dignity and a living wage. Labor Day was initially established precisely to help us appreciate the great gift that daily work is and to safeguard it against all that would demean it.

Therefore, let us give thanks for our calling to daily work. Let us remember those who are happily employed or busily retired; those who are unemployed or underemployed; those who are overworked and underpaid; let us pray for justice in the workplace and meaningful work for everyone.

The presiding minister addresses those affirming Christian vocation.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, believing that you are called to live out your baptismal covenant through your daily work, will you endeavor to pattern your life and service after the Lord Jesus Christ? **We will, and we ask God to help and guide us.**

Knowing that the weakness of the flesh and the temptations of the evil one are all around, will you make use of the means of grace so that, strengthened in faith, you may exhibit the love of God in your daily work? **We will, and we ask God to help and guide us.**

The presiding minister continues.

Let us pray. Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.* (Book of Common Prayer, p. 210, Collect 25, For Labor Day)

The service concludes with the blessing and dismissal.

Why We Ordain

Today we bring you the powerful sermon preached last weekend in Belleville, Illinois, at the ordination of Candice Stone (whose writing appeared in Thursday Theology #789).The sermonwas preached by Candice's mentor and pastor, Ron Neustadt. In it, Ron gets straight to the heart of why we bother ordaining people—what we ordain them to do, and why we so desperately need them to do it.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Ordination of Candice Wassell Stone
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Belleville, Illinois
John 20:19-23
August 9, 2014

Today we are doing a rare thing. In fact, before today, it has happened only once ever in the 38-year history of this congregation.

The rare thing we are going to do is that we are going to ordain someone to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. What that means is that Bishop Roth, representing the whole church, will consecrate Candice Wassell Stone for a particular function—to speak Good News to us and to the world—and to speak it over and over again.

Not just *any* good news, mind you, but specifically honest-to-God good news—good news that addresses our deepest longings and our deepest problem—the God-sized problem we have that comes from forever wanting to trust in ourselves rather than in the God who created us and loves us.

That's what we are ordaining Candice to do. And to do that ordaining, Bishop Roth will do as bishops have done for hundreds of years. He will place his hands on Candice's head and he will confer upon her the office of pastor.

Now, Candice is a particularly gifted woman. In fact, she is one of her generation's brightest and best. For starters, she is a scholar, which is to say, when it comes to matters important, she is not in the business of making things up.

And she has equipped herself with the tools of the trade. She has studied the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and the history of the church. She knows New Testament Greek (and a little bit of Hebrew). But she can also communicate in Facebook-ese. And she can relate as well to elders and to children as she does to her own generation. She's energetic and conscientious and seemingly tireless. And she has a super sense of humor. In fact, she has all those personality traits that congregations typically say they want in a pastor.

Not only that, like others before her who have been ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, she has been through a certification process that some say St. Paul himself probably would not have survived.

But, most importantly of all (at least for my money), she's a solid theologian. (And, if you don't want to take my word for it, I think you would get that same opinion from Dr. Ed Schroeder, who knows a theologian of the cross when he hears one.)

And yet, for all of that, this day is not about Candice—and Candice herself would probably be the first to tell you that.

In fact, it's not just today, but it's the entire office into which she is being ordained that is not about her. It's not as if her ordination is somehow a reward for something she has accomplished. Nor is it that she is being given some authority that the rest of us do not *already have—all of us, ordained or not*.

Candice, theologian of the cross that she is, would be the first to tell you that. And it is *true. All of you* have already been given the same authority to do what we are today ordaining Candice to do.

The trouble is, so often we don't use the authority we've been given. That is to say, so often we do not speak to one another the Promise that God has made to us through Jesus the Christ. So often we don't forgive one another. So often we "retain" the sins of one another instead of forgiving them. We let people stew. We keep our mouths shut. And the result is that grudges get held—and relationships get broken—and wars get fought…. And we die.

Sometimes people live their *entire lives* and die without ever having been able to take the deep breath of relief that comes from hearing the Good News that their sins have been forgiven. And sometimes that's because *we* are the ones who could have spoken those words, but haven't.

Worse yet is the *reason* we do not always forgive—and that's because we don't always trust God's promise to us (in Jesus) that God desires to forgive *us*. Even when others *do* speak God's word of forgiveness to us, we do not always trust it.

And then we have an *even bigger* problem. In fact, that's when we have a God-size problem. Because if we don't *trust* God's promise of forgiveness—we don't *have* forgiveness. God can offer it until God is blue in the face, but if we do not make use of the offer by trusting God, how can we have anything but ourselves—and that will get us only so far.

That's why we need Jesus—who was put to death for offering us God's forgiveness, *and whom God raised from the dead* for doing so in spite of our not always trusting him!

We need this crucified and risen Jesus precisely because we are so much like those disciples we just heard about in the Gospel reading. Remember the situation? They were sitting *behind locked doors* even though two of those disciples had been to the tomb earlier that day and found it empty! And even though Mary Magdalene had told them she had spoken with Jesus and he had told her: Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God.'

Jesus had wanted them to hear the good news that they were as dear to God as he was, and to believe it. But apparently the disciples did not believe that God had stood behind this forgiving Son of his. His resurrection meant that His Father was *their* Father, too. His God was *their* God, too. He had been put to death for making that Promise to them—and now he had been raised. His resurrection was their assurance of that.

It is our assurance, too. Jesus was willing to do whatever it took to get it across to us that God loves the world and each one of us that much. It's a promise he made with every breath he had. And God backed up that promise by raising Jesus from the dead.

Mary (the first to be "ordained," if you will) delivered that message.

But apparently the disciples did not believe it. Because there they sat that evening. With all the doors locked. Afraid. How could they be anything else but afraid if they did not trust the message? How could they even breathe in that stifling room with all their fear?

It was not until Jesus came into that locked room and showed them the death-wounds he had received for offering the forgiveness of God to all—and breathed on them—that they, too, could begin to breathe freely again.

That's why we do what we are doing today. That's why we ordain. Because God has graciously provided a way for Jesus and his promise to come to us *today*.

And we know how much like those disciples we are. We ordain because we know that we need Jesus to come to us—again and again—and to breathe on us his words of peace and forgiveness, and to give us the courage to offer that forgiveness to others as well.

So we ordain you today, Candice, because we want you to bring Jesus to us. We trust his Promise, but at the same time, we also keep trusting in ourselves, so we need to hear him again and again. We need his breath so that we can live and forgive, and not just exist. So bring Jesus to us, Candice.

And when we imagine that we do not need the Promise he offers us, remind us again of why he is so *necessary*. In plain words, Candice, speak God's other word to us as well. Speak God's law to us so that we do not deceive ourselves. Be honest with us about God's judgment of us, lest we end up trusting ourselves and fail to make use of the promises he died to offer us.

And then tell us again why Jesus is so good. And show us! Show us by administering Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the Office of the Keys according to His Promises.

We know, of course, that this is exactly what each one of us is called to do for one another, but we also know how much we are like those disciples—and we cannot leave something this important up to chance.

So bring the Promise to us, Candice. Bring Jesus to us. That's what we ordain you to do. Nothing else. NO ADD-ONS. NO SUBSTITUTIONS.

And, finally, keep in mind how dear to God *you* are on account of Jesus *who loves you and gives you eternal comfort and good hope* (to paraphrase your confirmation verse from 2 Thessalonians).

And know that we will pray for you—and we ask that you pray for us: **Fill us, O God, with your Holy Spirit. And continue to breathe your Holy Spirit into Candice and all of us so we can breathe freely and speak your Word to one another, forgive one another, and bring your Promise to the world that you love so dearly. Amen**.

Eschatology as a Function of the Gospel

This week we bring you an essay on eschatology by the Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl, the Executive Director of Crossings.

It's an essay Steve wrote this summer, in response to a millennial-aged student ("Kelly") in his college course called "Introduction to Christianity." As you'll see from Steve's comments, the course uses a textbook called *Introducing Christianity*, by James R. Adair (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), which Steve uses as a jumping-off point for deeper discussions with his students. This particular discussion took place on the course's online discussion board, and Kelly's initial comment and final response are included to give context to Steve's thoughts.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Eschatology as a Function of the Gospel: An attempt to help a Millennial to go beyond Millenarianism.

By Steven C. Kuhl

Kelly's Comment: I find the topic of eschatology compelling, and much more diverse in expectation or "approach," than I expected after reading Adair. As we have seen the evolution of what is viewed as doctrine accepted over time, the topic of the world ending also changes over time as well. I question why the event or thought of the world ending even exists? I am somewhat compelled to think of it as a "motivator" for humanity to lead a Christian life as there is a "dark looming cloud" out there…I do not want to call it a "threat" but…one day, we all will have our judgment day. Is this to help drive our moral compass, to live righteously, to instill conscience? I sometimes think of it as a fearful event, but if I am Christian…there is nothing for me to worry about as I will be saved.

I have read about the apocalypse, have read about the different theories regarding the several years of Tribulation…but no one really knows if we will be witness to this, or be carried off spiritually prior to the event, knowing that we are Christians. I also find it interesting that we have had so many events that have been sensationalized in the media as the last coming…for example the millennial change 1999-2000? I think we did alright….

Dr. Kuhl's Response: Kelly, You make good comments and raise important questions on the discussion of eschatology. I wish we could talk face to face because there are so many assumptions that need to be uncovered, clarified, challenged, and redirected in this topic. Of course, as I've noted elsewhere, Adair, in our textbook, is looking at the totality of the Christian Tradition from two distinct methodological standpoints. The first approach proceeds from a "historical" point of view and entails a rehearsal of church history, identifying key developments in various ages. The second approach, which we are using now, is called a "phenomenological" approach and it proceeds by looking at contemporary Christianity as a whole and identifying the diversity of views that are therein. Remember, as Adair noted earlier, when we speak of "Christianity" we mean those traditions that have emerged in history that agree with the basic theological outlook of the Councils of Nicene, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon (the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Formula) on the topics of the Trinity and the person of Christ. Defining Christianity this way helps us to focus the discussion.

In this week's chapter, Adair identifies five theological themes (by no means exhaustive) that are important to contemporary Christianity: the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, justification by faith, church and state relations, and eschatology. You ask: Why does the topic of eschatology even come up? Is it to motivate Christian behavior? I would say "No" to that, but more on that later. The more basic reason it is an important topic is because not everything that Jesus has promised to those who place their trust in him has yet come to pass. Eschatology addresses the concern to bring comfort to believers who still wait for unfulfilled promises, who still languish under the burdens of this world, by which I mean their sin, the law's accusation, and death as its wage.

Unfortunately, Adair does not describe that kind of eschatology. His discussion overlooks the wide range of eschatological thought that has emerged since WWII, especially among those who would be called "Mainline Christians." Mainly he focuses on those "traditions" (broadly termed as Conservative Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal) that define eschatology primarily as a function of “millenarianism,” a preoccupation with predicting the sequence of future events about the promised return of Christ that revolves around a literal 1,000- (hence, “mille”) year reign of peace on earth. To be sure, not all millenarians or millennialists agree. Postmillennialists, on the one hand, believe that Christ will return to rule *after* (hence, “post”) humanity has established a 1,000 year reign of peace on earth. It was popular in the 19th century when a spirit of optimism was fueled by the Industrial Revolution. Premillennialists, on the other hand, believe Christ will come *before*(hence, “pre”) the 1,000-year reign of peace on earth. Disillusioned by 19th-century optimism and liberalism, they believe Christ will establish his millennial reign according to a sequence of events in which 1) the Antichrist will inflict a “great tribulation” upon the earth, 2) accompanied by the rapture (escape) of true Christians, 3) followed by the Second Coming of Christ in glory to conquer the Antichrist, 4) bringing about his subsequent enthronement to a 1,000-year reign of peace on earth, 5) after which “the end.” All this comes from a quasi-literal preoccupation with certain apocalyptic books of the Bible (whose symbolic language is understood as having predictive value on future theological events) and the assumption that if one can discern the signs of the times one is better off.

I want to leave this Millenarian view behind for now and present a view of eschatology that sees it not as a function of predicting future theological events but as a function of the Gospel. Eschatology, then, gets its meaning when it is seen in light of Jesus’ first coming, particularly, the saving work he accomplished in his death and resurrection. With that as our interpretive key, Biblical eschatology must always be interpreted as a function of Biblical soteriology (= God’s plan of salvation through Christ) and not as independent futuristic speculation. Let me explain.

Eschatology, which literally means “last things,” refers to those “good things” that Christians are still waiting for. Jesus’ work is not yet done; he must return to bring to fruition the fullness of what he has promised and procured in his death and resurrection. The Creeds (Nicene and Apostles’) give us some hint as to what those “last things” are: namely, “the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” What believers have already received by faith is “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” and fellowship with a community of believers (“the communion of saints”); what they await, in faith, is the fulfillment of the promised “new creation” or new life: a new resurrected (bodily) self that lives eternally, with ‘eternally’ meaning “with God.” Eternal life means not just “unending life” but the “divine” life. To be sure, it includes “no ending,” for God is eternal in that sense, but it also means more than that. It means the kind of life God enjoys we will enjoy. It’s like children in a family: they enjoy and participate in the very life or living that their parents live in. So it is also with regard to the children of God: what is Christ’s is theirs and what is theirs is Christ’s. For they are afforded the same status before God as the Son of God, Jesus Christ, enjoys: to be children of God and heirs of eternal life. That is Christ’s promise to his believing disciples; that is why he says they can address his Father as their Father in the Lord’s Prayer. Of course, what all is entailed in this divine life has not yet been revealed to us: so the category “eternal life” will have to suffice for now. Christians will know what it means when it comes to pass, just as Christians claimed to know what the Old Testament promises about the messiah meant when the messiah, Jesus Christ, came and did his dying and rising to reconcile God and humanity. For now, before the fulfillment, Christians live in faith and anticipation of great things to come: the resurrection of the body and life eternal. Eschatology is important because it assures believers that they are not "left behind," so to speak, and so it assures them to be patient in the midst of this world's trials and live lovingly in the present with hope.

Of course, there are also what might be called "troubling things" that are also still to come. Just as Christians await the final fulfillment of their redemption from sin, so they also, along with the whole world, await the final judgment that must come because of their sin.

As you may recall, when we talked about original sin, we said that sin refers to a congenital, oppositional defiant characteristic in humanity that sets humanity in opposition to God. Sin designates the fact that I am by nature self-centered versus God-Centered; that I make myself the measure of all things rather than God, who is the creator and rightful owner of all things. To top it off, Christians know that God is the accuser of sinful humanity, including themselves, and that God's accusation coincides with the everyday experience of law that permeates every aspect of human life.

Therefore, a central aspect of eschatology is that everybody is entitled to his or her day in court; everyone has the right to meet his or her accuser. That is only fair—and that is what the Day of Judgment is all about: our right to fairness, our right to try to justify ourselves, our right to our day in court with our accuser. For just as our civil justice system ensures the right of accused criminals to have their day in court (and we as Americans prize that right), so also God ensures that right for accused sinners. But note: that kind of fairness is hardly joy-inducing, especially if the evidence is stacked up against us. Nevertheless, sooner or later, every human being will have their day in court before God and face the consequences for how they have lived.

Not only do Christians accept the rightness of a Day of Judgment (and note: they are not the only religious tradition to do so; Jews and Muslims do as well), they also believe, in a sense, that they have already faced that Day. For inasmuch as Christians take to heart Jesus' message "to repent and believe the good news," the agenda of Judgment Day is being settled out of court. For Jesus is the "end-time Judge" who has come "in the mean time" to settle out of court with those who wish to do so. And what a settlement it is! He promises to make our sin and death his sin and death and, in return, to make his righteousness and life our righteousness and life. And where is this settlement sealed? In his cross and resurrection. On the cross he volunteered to bear the full consequences of human sin, and in his resurrection he earned the right to give out his righteousness to whoever would receive it. To be sure, this kind of settlement is not to be forced on anyone; it is received by faith alone. That is why the settlement is always presented as an offer and never a demand and is always received as a gift and not an imposition.

For Christians, then, the Last Judgment will be, for all practical purposes, a formality. It is not something they face in fear, but in hope, because they already know the Judge's verdict; their settlement is secured by faith in the end-time Judge, Jesus. Therefore, there is nothing more comforting for Christians than when the Nicene Creed says "he [Jesus] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." For they know this Judge Jesus. They know that he has already offered them forgiveness free for the believing. They already know that the outcome of that Day of Judgment was sealed on the day they were introduced to Jesus (often in baptism) and believed in his promise (a moment hard to mark, but easy to know that it has happened). For Christians, then, Judgment Day means that they will enter into "eternal life," a life reconciled with God because of their well-placed faith in the Judge, Jesus.

You asked, Kelly, about the logic behind this teaching: Is it meant to "motivate" people to live the Christian life? It depends on what you mean by "motivate." If you mean "scare them into some kind of moral compliance," then the answer is no. If you mean "assure them that Jesus will fulfill his promises," then the answer is yes. Eschatology is about creating hope and patience, not fear and anxiety. Nevertheless, there still might be reason for people to have fear and anxiety. Indeed, whenever we come to a knowledge of our own sin—which is always evoked by the reality of law—it is certainly appropriate to respond to that knowledge in fear. But that's not the purpose of eschatology. On the contrary, if anyone has fear and anxiety about their sin and how they fare before God, eschatology as a function of the Gospel is precisely the antidote.

Although fear and anxiety are the last things the teaching on eschatology is meant to produce, I admit, unfortunately, that the doctrine is often presented that way. Indeed, for the most part the millenarian positions Adair presents all tend, in my judgment, to deteriorate eschatology into that kind of message. It is certainly, in my judgment, the message that the *Left Behind* series presents to its readers. As a rule, Adair is cautious in his criticisms of the dispensational premillennialist outlook that the *Left Behind* series presents in popular, entertainment format. But even as he consistently adheres to his phenomenological approach (with its commitment to deep description, not theological critique), Adair cannot help but offer a kind of political critique of the outlook. "Non-dispensationalists," he says, "sometimes accuse dispensationalists of trying to influence international politics in an effort to set events in motion that will ultimately result in Christ's Second Coming, such as polices designed (their critics say) to inflame Israeli-Arab dissention" (p. 369). That tendency of dispensationalists to glory in Middle Eastern tragedy in order to buttress their end-times outlook is linked precisely to the fact that for them eschatology is a function of predicting the future and not proclaiming the Gospel. If any one of the categories of eschatology that Adair identifies fits the approach I have described here it would be the amillennialist approach which Adair links to Augustine and which he says has been the dominant approach for much of the history of Christianity. But that is a history-of-theology topic for another time.

I know this is a long response. I hope it is helpful.

Kelly's reply: That was very nice of you to provide such expansive thoughts in this response….that takes much time… and I appreciate that in you and am sure many other students do as well. Thank you for your time to explain.

Adding the Gospel

This week we bring you a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Steve Albertin, whose writing last appeared in this space in Thursday Theology #782.

Steve preached this sermon on July 19-20, on the parable of the wheat and the weeds. He introduced it to us in an e-mail as follows:

> *It is an example of bringing to Gospel to a text that has none. Many attempts to preach the parable of the Wheat and Weeds end up moralizing, telling the hearers to be tolerant of*

differences or just to hang in there until God straightens out the mess that is the church—and the world—in the end. Through application of Law and Gospel and Apology 4's daring willingness to "add the Gospel" where there is none, this is what can happen: Christ is magnified and hearers are comforted.

We're glad to share Steve's work with you today.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"WHAT A WAY TO FARM!"
Matthew 13:24-30, 35-43
Lectionary 16 A, Pentecost 6 A
July 19/20, 2014

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

It hasn't changed much over the centuries. The critics of the church have pretty much always said the same thing. The church is a messy place, filled with hypocrites who are no better than anyone else. Until it cleans up the mess, they will have no part of it.

The church has certainly tried over time to clean up the mess. Sooner or later someone says, "Let's clean up the membership rolls and get rid of the deadwood. It's time to have a congregation of truly committed members. The wishy-washy days are over." However good such intentions might be, they often turn the church into a spiritual Gestapo with everyone spying on each other, judging one another and criticizing those who are not pure enough. There is little toleration of diversity. Everyone is keeping score. Hypocrisy is a way of life. No wonder people want to have no part of a place like that.

In today’s Gospel Jesus tells a parable that speaks to a messy church. The parable may not satisfy the critics but it promises to help us who struggle with the mess.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field. However, that night while he slept, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. When the plants came up and bore grain, weeds appeared as well. The servants of the owner came and said to him, “Master, we don’t get it. We are sure that you planted only good seed in your field. Where did all these weeds come from?”

The master doesn’t blink an eye. “An enemy has done this.”

This enemy is very crafty. The Greek text uses the word *zizania* for the type of weed that the enemy sows. *Zizania* when it starts growing looks almost exactly like wheat. It is only when it reaches maturity and it bears no wheat that it is obviously a weed. When the *zizania* matures, the servants recognize weeds and like any conscientious farmer say, “Then do you want us to go and weed the field and gather up the weeds?”

The master surprisingly says, “No, lest when gathering the weeds, you root up the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. I love to see weeds and wheat grow together. I don’t want you accidentally pulling out some of the wheat with the weeds. Just leave it alone. We will straighten it all out in October.”

What kind of a farmer is this? This is no way to run a farm!

This sounds like the same farmer that we heard about last week. He also had a rather strange way of farming. In the verses immediately preceding this parable we heard how he went out to sow his seed. We expected him to carefully plow up the ground, mark the rows, place each seed carefully in the furrow, cover them up, then studiously water and weed them. But when the farmer starts to sow, he just flings the seed everywhere. Sure enough, much of the seed falls on the hardened path, among the rocks, in the midst of the thorns, or is snatched up by the birds. What a waste! Most of the seed fails to bring forth anything. What a sloppy farmer! Nevertheless, miraculously—and this is the key to the parable—some of it does find some good soil. There is a huge harvest surpassing everyone's expectations. Wow! What a way to farm! It is certainly not very efficient, but it works.

As if that parable were not confusing enough, Jesus follows it with this parable. Again, there is disaster. There are weeds everywhere. Any sensible and efficient farmer would pull the weeds, but not this one. Let it all go until the harvest. Then he will separate the wheat from the weeds. The weeds will be gathered and burned. The wheat will be stored in his barn. In the meantime, trust the Master. Let the weeds grow. Live with the mess. Be patient. In the end, God will sort things out.

So, what does this parable say about the church? It is a messy place. Here the wheat and the weeds grow together. It is filled with saints and sinners and we don't know which are which. When we look around, we see those who surely must be weeds. They can't get their kids to behave. They are selfish and petty. They can't control their tongues and think that gossip is a badge of honor. They do not belong here. They ought to be weeded out and asked to leave. That sounds sensible and efficient. Clean this place up and then we will have a church that people will want to join. But Jesus tells us not to pull the weeds. Leave the place a mess because, if we try to clean things up, we will end up doing more harm than good.

What a way to farm!

However, such patience is easier said than done. God has more patience than we do. We can’t help ourselves. More often than not, like the farmer’s servants, we can’t wait to pull the weeds.

In the world, passing judgment, keeping score, evaluating one another—and pulling weeds—*is* the way to run a farm. Even God wants it that way. We have to make judgments. We have to fire those who do not perform. We have to reward productivity. We have to give people what they deserve. We have to do what is just and fair. That’s the way to run a farm, a business, the stock market and the classroom. It’s the right thing to do.

However, we do it with a passion that betrays its true source. It is not very pretty. We are afraid. We are afraid that we are not valued. We are afraid that our lives are too messy to measure up. We hunger for the approving smile and thirst for the thumbs-up verdict. And we often do it at the expense of others. We are quick to criticize, always comparing ourselves to others, always pointing out the mess in everyone else’s lives while ignoring the mess in ours. We are jealous, envious, and suspicious. We are quick to condemn those who do not measure up. We want to play God, passing judgment on the worth of those we do not approve. We don’t care if some of the wheat gets pulled in the process because all that matters is cleaning up the mess and looking good.

In this parable Jesus reminds us that the final judgment is God’s job and not ours. Yet, ever since the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve believed the lie of the serpent, we no longer trust God to sort things out. We are gods thinking we can control our own lives and the lives of others. We get to decide who is good and evil, who is wheat and who is a weed, who is part of the mess and who has got their act cleaned up. However, playing god is dangerous. When we do, we have become the weeds we wanted to root out. You know what happens to the weeds according to Jesus. God doesn’t just roll over and forget about it. God will throw them “into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Who then “is righteous and shines like the sun?” Who then can ever hope to endure the day when the “Son of Man will send his angels” to finally gather the weeds and cast them into “the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?” Who then can count on getting a thumbs-up when our lives are still so infested with weeds?

Jesus has pushed us to the edge so that we stop focusing on the mess, the mess in our lives and in the lives of others. Instead, he invites us to turn to him. He has been sent by the Master of the farm to clean up the mess. Just when we thought that we would be cast into the fire, we hear him say to us the same comforting word he said to another weed who hung there beside him on the cross and thought he was doomed. “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

What a way to run a farm! The weeds that deserve to be pulled and cast into the fire, the Master with his strange and wonderful mercy saves. The Master sends his son, Jesus, straight into the mess. Jesus grows among the weeds. He becomes one of us because he is not willing to abandon to us the furnace of fire. He loves all the plants growing in the field, even the weeds. On that dark Friday, he suffers *as* a weed *with* all the weeds of this world. He is cast into the furnace of fire. He cries out weeping and gnashing his teeth, “My God, my God, why have your forsaken me, why are you treating me like a weed?”

No weed is beyond the reach of God’s love. When Jesus is raised, God proves that Jesus’ love for weeds was not just Jesus’ love but God’s love, the Master of the farm. Then we who thought we were weeds surprisingly find ourselves gathered into the barn as wheat, the valued crop of the Master. Every time we gather here around Word and Sacrament, we receive that blessed assurance.

With a future like that, we no longer need to be afraid that we are weeds, worried about where we stand. Therefore, we can be patient. We can withhold judgment and let God clean up the mess at the harvest. We can turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, forgive our enemies and let God be God. We can live with a messy church and messy lives.

St. Paul puts it well in today’s Second Reading. Even when the world is a mess, we can hope. When we look around us, all we may see is the mess. But we have been assured that in spite of what we see, we are wheat. Confident of the future, trusting that in the end God will gather us into his barn and not cast us into the fire, we can live with the weeds. We can even love the weeds.

This may be no way to run a farm, but it is the way God runs the farm. Thanks be to God that God does.

On Hope and Ignorance: Gleanings from the Mission

Field

Colleagues:

I'm this week's writer. On digging in I planned to send along some notes about a handful of items that have snagged my eye in recent months, each sparking some passing thoughts about the mentality that is either emerging or already prevails in the American mission field that most of us operate in. As it happens, I got carried away with the first of the notes, and the handful got reduced to two. See below. I'll keep the others in mind for future posts, with the continuing aim of suggesting specific points at which Christ-trusting kerygmatists (to coin a word) would do well to direct their energies and the Gospel's gifts in our present place and moment. Your own suggestions along these lines would be heartily welcomed.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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1. On Paltry HopeA coworker blessed me last Christmas with a novel to read as a break from the usual stuff. When I finally dug in, it turned out to be a rollicking good read with an immensely clever and inventive plot, and I recommend it heartily: *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, by Robin Sloan. The blurb-meisters at litlovers.com describe it as "a gleeful and exhilarating tale of global conspiracy, complex code-breaking, high-tech data visualization, young love, rollicking adventure, and the secret to eternal life—mostly set in a hole-in-the-wall San Francisco bookstore," though Google's Silicon Valley campus also figures in, as does an arcane library carved from the

bedrock of subterranean Manhattan. Amazon's current price for the paperback edition is $8.52.

Well-written novels have always afforded a host of windows on the mindset of the place and era they're written for, and that's true of this one. The thirty-something American author illuminates any number of passions peculiar to his specific slice of that generation—irreligious, cyberphilic, exceedingly smart and confident about their ability to find their way in the world. And then there's this: to the extent that the author's voice is being heard through the novel's protagonist and first-person narrator, one surmises a certain bemusement, not to say frustration, with people of his age and social location who continue to harbor fantasies of living forever, if only the secret for doing that were somehow to come to light.

As if, he gently snorts, there is such a secret.

And just as gently he brings his audience back to earth. An immortality there is, but only that which comes of having friends so true and good—so brilliant in their own way, and so collaborative—that they'll abet and magnify your accomplishments, and you theirs, to the enduring benefit of future generations who will remember you in connection with them. At least I think that's what he says. Or perhaps it's friendship itself that lives forever as the key to happiness and success in the here and now for the lucky few who have the good fortune to find it among the odd ducks of the world. (The book teems with idiosyncratic characters who pursue their passions in shadowy places, far from the mainstream.) In any case, the conclusion is opaque. That may well be deliberate. The author, being smart, wants to disabuse us of nonsense, though without completely disappointing us. That would be cruel, and the book aims to be anything but cruel, nor does it touch in any serious way on the cruelty of the world. As for life, its advice to readers is to make the most of it, be true to yourself, and enjoy it while it lasts.

Or, again, so I think. And thinking that, I return to another thought that has crossed my mind often in recent years, about the poverty of secular hope. There isn't much to it. I say that as somebody who, with lots of you, has been reveling again these past couple of Sundays in the exuberance of Romans 8. How is it, I wonder, that people are willing to take a pass on so enormous and bracing an expectation, all creation groaning as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God," and its ensuing liberation from "bondage to decay" and the obtaining, by "creation itself," of "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Okay, do I know what that means, in the sense of describing what it will look and feel like? No. But it sure sounds spectacular, and it sure invites me to think more highly than I usually do of those musty phrases at the end of the creed: "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." But the church has long since dumbed those phrases down, hasn't it; and Christians have colluded in reducing hope in Christ to the rubbish of the afterlife as conceived in the popular imagination, a shadowy lingering on in the cramped company of dear, sweet Grandma, Aunt Sally perhaps, and hardly anyone else. Does anyone ever talk at funerals, or even over a cup of Bible-class coffee, about the astonishing prospect—the grand adventure, to put it more exactly—of seeing God Almighty face to face and not only surviving the experience, but enjoying it as well? Of finding oneself unencumbered, once and for all, of all the garbage that gums up the arteries of body and spirit alike? Of sticking our toes, gently at first, even gingerly, perhaps, into a world devoid of evil? Of exploring a reality so new, so rich, so high and deep, so utterly good, that it will keep us dancing in the joy of God forever? But no, we mutter the word “heaven” and let it go at that. Worse, we populate that heaven with people just like us and ignore St. Matthew’s invitation—he’ll pepper us with this in coming weeks—to fancy the prospect of chatting cheerfully with the likes of mad magi, blind beggars, and that Canaanite woman’s crazy daughter, all of them made new because somebody trusted Jesus to do that for them.

I wonder if this shriveling of Christian hope hasn’t fed the abandonment of hope by today’s smart set. I mean hope of the personal kind, the prospect of a new me and a new you having ourselves an everlasting blast in an eschatological beyond that presents itself as sheer, impossible gift, too good to be true and yet—God be praised—it is true. But this is precisely the hope that *Mr. Penumbra* dismisses; and the dismissal is even fiercer in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the atheist’s defiant rejoinder to C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. I read this a few years ago. Pullman is a whale of a writer. He easily beats Lewis at the storytelling game, with a magnificent mind-stretching tale that grips from beginning to end, every word in perfect place. Along the way he hammers on the church, which he loathes with a frank and unmasked bitterness. It peddles lies, he says; it drapes the human spirit in needless chains, it sucks the joy from being vividly alive, not least as sexual human beings. Anyone who knows the church, small “c,” and its age-old penchant for reducing evangelical magnificence to rule-encrusted dreck is obliged to cede some points to Pullman—many points, even. And when Pullman charges that the church’s promise of afterlife is far too mean and dreary to warrant the dreariness it imposes on people in the here and now, I, for one would heartily agree, on the grounds, again, that what the church keeps peddling as a matter of course is a wretchedly desiccated promise, dreary in the extreme.

Yet for all his determination to expose lies and shred false hope, it’s Pullman who, in the end, delivers nonsense in the form of a hope so ludicrously thin that it’s no hope at all. It’s as if, like *Mr. Penumbra’s*Robin Sloan, he can’t quite bear to leave the reader staring at the prospect of utter extinction, with nothing whatsoever beyond death to look forward to. There has got to be, for me, something, if only the faintest smidgeon of a something: at least a remembering, as Sloan seems to tell it. In Pullman’s story there’s a wee bubble of happiness, a frisson of joy as the dead release their atoms to mingle with all the other atoms of the universe, and who knows, perhaps the atoms of dead heroes and lovers will bump into each other in the vastness to come, and when they do they’ll vibrate with a hint of mutual recognition. Oh happy day!

Really, was Pullman able to keep a straight face as he committed this to paper? I can’t help but wonder.

Of this I have no doubt, that the Church, large “C”, has a huge gift to pass along in the hope it gets to tell, if only we’ll learn from the apostolic likes of Paul to tell it well, in deed as well as word, through the spending of the self for the sake of the other that Christians at their best, banking on their future, have cheerfully done throughout the centuries. The key to this, of course, lies in starting and ending the telling with the astonishment called Christ. Romans 8 is the inexorable outcome of Romans 3-5. It drives with equal resolution to the doxological outburst to the end of Romans 11, where Paul wraps up his ruminations on Israel's rejection of the Gospel by committing one and all to the inscrutable mystery of the God who has better things in mind for the likes of Pullman and Sloan than they have for themselves, to say nothing of the rest of us (see 11:32). For whom else did Christ die, if not for people whose imaginations, vivid though they be, are unwilling to encompass the best story ever?

Comes a delicious irony, and with it a point of conversational contact: turns out that Robin Sloan is on to something as he wraps up *Mr. Penumbra*. The secret to eternal life really does lie in having the right friend.

2. On Burgeoning IgnoranceAnyone who teaches in U.S. churches these days is aware of how poorly known the Biblical story has gotten to be in the wider culture. Moses? "Never heard of him." The Lord's Prayer? "What's that?" And there's worse on its way. Here's a note (in case you missed it) that appeared in *The Christian Century* a couple of months ago, picking up on a report in the April 18 edition of the British newspaper *The Independent*:

   > *"A Good Friday passion play was called off after the Oxford (England) City Council said the sponsoring church failed to get the proper permit. The council acted on the presumption that the passion play was a live sex show. In a statement of apology, an official said, 'At the time of processing the application, I did not appreciate that this was a religious event.'"*

Two fast comments. a) No wonder hope has shriveled in the contemporary West. b) And you thought, perhaps, that we exaggerate in calling this a mission field?Jerome Burce
Fairview Park, Ohio