

A Belated “Duh!” on “Take Up [Your] Cross and Follow Me.”

Colleagues,

With burdens come gifts. If preaching most every Sunday is often a pain in the neck—it’s meant to be: see the stole, and the yoke it represents—it also rewards the preacher now and then with little bursts of unexpected insight into aspects of the Word of God that he or she hadn’t penetrated before. Call them “Aha!” moments, if you will; though every so often one does better to call it a “Duh!” moment. That’s when the thing so suddenly tumbled to appears in retrospect to have been so obvious that you can’t fathom why it took you so long to grab hold of it.

Today’s offering reports briefly on a “Duh!” moment that the undersigned both savored and suffered in a midnight hour of preparation for this year’s Second Sunday in Lent. The text was [Mark 8:31-38](#). The key line was the ever so familiar “Take up your cross and follow me.” For the content that spilled out, see below. In seeing, you’ll quickly grasp why the spillage occasioned a deep, enduring blush of embarrassment. Really, it took decades to spot this? “Duh!”

So why the blindness, and why so long? Again, see below for some incomplete mulling on this. It includes a suspicion that, where the plain meaning of this particular set of words is concerned, blindness is not an exception in the Church, but the norm. That will explain our chutzpah in passing this along to you, however thoughtful and canny we take you to be. Could be there’s a “Duh!” of your own that’s waiting to erupt. And if some younger readers are thereby spared the same long, silly delay in hearing what Christ is telling us here, then God be praised.

By the way, this Markan text is featured twice in Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary. Those of us who follow the RCL, whether as listeners or preachers, will encounter it again on the second Sunday of this coming September. That's another reason for thinking about it today.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

“Take Up [Your] Cross and Follow Me.” What Does This Mean?

I. Preamble

For a sneak peak at what it means, see the second-last paragraph of [Steven Kuhl's first lecture on discipleship](#) at the 2012 International Crossings Conference. Steve gets it. He lays it out in the precise, meticulous prose of a careful theologian. He presents it as the capstone of a precise, meticulous argument, the kind that careful theologians take pains to assemble so as to drive their readers to an inescapable conclusion. What Steve doesn't do in that paper is to show how the text itself—the very phrase, “Take up [your] cross”—allows for no interpretation other than the one he arrives at. I'll attend to that task here. It's a lighter chore, though also more painful. It means confessing a long-term failure in that most basic of skills, i.e. reading.

II. Notes on the Text

- a. My focus is squarely on the phrase “Take up [your] cross.” It appears once in Mark (8:34), twice in Matthew (10:38, 16:24), and once in Luke (9:23). Luke also offers a variant, “Carry [your] cross” (14:27), the latter appearing in Luke’s parallel to Matthew 10:38.
- b. Why the “your” in square brackets? Because the possessive pronoun in all five citations is in the third person masculine singular, i.e. “his” cross. 21st century English doesn’t like that usage when it’s apparent from the context that all persons, male and female alike, are embraced in whatever Jesus is saying here. Obeying that preference, NRSV renders “their cross” in three of the occurrences, and “the cross” in the other two. The latter qualifies as mistranslation, ignoring, as it does, the personal possessive pronoun that’s unmistakably there, and is essential to the point Jesus is making. (See below.)
- c. The five occurrences deliver two distinct though related sayings. First, “If anyone wishes to come behind me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mk. 8:34, unofficial Burce version (uBv); cf. Matt. 16:24, Lk. 9:23). Second, “The person who doesn’t take his cross and follow behind me isn’t worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38, uBv, par. Lk. 14:27, where “isn’t worthy of me” is replaced with “can’t be my disciple.”).
- d. The first saying occurs in connection with Jesus’ first passion prediction, itself following hard on Peter’s declaration about Jesus’ Messianic identity. In Mark and Matthew (though not Luke) the passion prediction elicits Peter’s protest, which leads in turn to Jesus’ rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan.” Here

the Greek preposition is “opisoh,” which pops up again, and almost immediately, when Jesus says, “If anyone wants to come or follow ‘opisoh’ me...”—though translators almost always render it at this point as “after me.” That’s too bad. It obscures what Greek-speaking hearers would catch in a heartbeat, i.e. that Jesus is ordering us all to stand precisely where Peter has just been sent to stand, i.e. behind him, dogging his heels.

- e. The second saying is, in Matthew, a piece of Jesus’ instruction for his apostolic interns, and, in Luke, a piece of his extended warning to the eager beavers who want to tag along with him on the long, meandering trek to Jerusalem.
- f. In two of the occurrences—Mark 8 and Luke 14—Jesus says what he says not only to his disciples, but also to the crowds. In other words, they too—the uncommitted, the merely curious—are included when Jesus speaks of “[your] cross” as a thing to be taken up. Of the contextual data that bear on the interpretation of the phrase, this item is the most important—and the most commonly ignored in readings that go awry, as the great majority of them keep doing.

III. So What does it Mean?

- a. For sure it doesn’t mean what I always thought it might have meant, or what today’s commentators, scholarly and popular alike, keep thinking that it means.
- b. For what those commentators are thinking, try a Google search on “take up your cross.” Here are the two main ideas that will tumble immediately from the first page of results: i) It means embracing the prospect, if nothing else, that following Jesus

might entail some serious suffering down the road. (There are bad guys out there. They don't like the Jesus crowd. Their name is Legion.) ii) It means gritting your teeth and settling down already now to some suffering in the form of self-abnegation, undertaken for Jesus' sake as a means either of developing one's personal faith muscles, or of extending his costly service to others, or both. (Evangelical sites have a penchant for the muscle-building angle, old mainline ones for the costly service approach.)

- c. Be it said that these ideas aren't of themselves illegitimate. The New Testament supports them (see, e.g., [1 Cor. 9:23-27](#), [1 Peter 5:8-9](#)). They also continue to be illustrated vividly in the ongoing experience of many Christian people.
- d. What can't be done, legitimately, is to extract these ideas from "Take up [your] cross." I know. I've tried to do that in my own preaching past. It has never quite worked. Something in the effort has always rung false, whether false to the text, or false to the people I've been talking to about the text, the aim of that talking being to deliver a word that's been tailored by the Lord precisely for them.
- e. So, for example, it doesn't ring true to suggest that Jesus is talking to us about the *possibility* of something we may or may not stumble into as the future unfolds—persecution-driven suffering, say. The problem here is one of implied tense, as in grammatical tense. If you ask me to pick something up, you're assuming the thing is there for me to grab hold of. "Take up [your] cross" can only mean that said cross is a "now" thing, a grim and bitter

feature of the moment I presently occupy.

- f. Nor does it ring true to blather on about suffering to people who tumbled out of bed this morning feeling hale, hearty, and happy, and thanking God for God's manifold gifts, among which is the extreme unlikelihood, at least in Western countries, of ever being persecuted for being Christian.
- g. So suppose I notice that. Suppose then that I feel impelled to invest the text with some kind of meaningful substance for hearers to grab hold of. Suppose still further that I try, as so many others do, to locate this substance in new disciplines of one kind or another—another one percent in the offering plate, another hour or two of weekly prayer or service at the food pantry. Will I not be heard equating such things with the agony of crucifixion? I may as well invite the hearers to go home despising their preacher for having been a fool that morning, or worse, a charlatan. And still worse—much worse: the more astute of them will sit around their dinner tables observing that whatever they heard in church an hour or two ago didn't qualify as good news. Not even close.
- h. So what's a preacher to do? Answer: read the text. Engage the words that stare at you from the page. Resist the impulse to dance around their plain meaning. Then serve as Jesus' mouth today and tell it like is.
- i. Take the big essential word: "cross." It's here that most every interpretation I've run across immediately jumps the rails. That includes the notions I've fumbled with in my own prior thinking, if you can call it that. The mistake is to read "cross" as a metaphor for suffering, and only

suffering, nothing else. But that's dancing around the word. It's refusing to grab hold of the plain meaning of the thing.

- j. What is a cross? A device for killing people. It kills them, to be sure, in an especially brutal and agonizing way, but even so, the fact that heaps of suffering is involved is secondary to the item's main objective, i.e. that the person nailed to it should wind up dead, some other person—bigger, badder, bristling with legal authority—having decreed that he or she ought to be dead, and has got to be dead.
- k. So “cross” as a metaphor doesn't point in the first place to suffering, but rather to an act of condemning judgment. “Cross” equals “death sentence,” and this as a fait accompli, no wriggling around it. For me to have a cross means, in the essence of the thing, that Burce is dead meat. Why? Because Somebody Else, swinging the gavel, has announced that Burce must die. Now the only thing left is to make that happen.
- l. Turn now to the singular pronoun that Jesus uses to modify the main noun. Whichever you opt for in your own reading—“his,” “her,” “your,” take your pick—it makes the death sentence personal. Ah, but personal to which persons? Here the context piles in, especially at Mark 8:34, with its inescapable answer: “[Jesus] called the *crowd with* his disciples, and said to them [all]...” In other words, not a one of them is exempt from what he's about to say. Nor is any other individual example of the humanity-in-general they represent.
- m. And what does Jesus say? “*Take up* [your] cross.” This takes it for granted that I *have* a cross (see

above, III.e.). It means that Jesus is speaking to the denizens of Death Road, so to speak. That's all of us. No exceptions.

- n. But try telling that to the crowds we share the road with today. They'll hoot. They'll laugh. At some point they'll rage. And even in the Church, where people ought to know better, you'll hear passionate, angry cries, echoing Peter's (Mk. 8:32b), that this cannot be so. Still, one might as well cry that the sky can't be blue. Sinners, of course, have a problem with denial. They always have. They always will. And there is nothing they'll deny with greater ferocity than God's right to condemn them.
- o. This brings us at last to the phrase a whole. "Take up [your] cross...." Is there a one of us who hasn't heard this described, over and over, as "a call to discipleship"? Have we not talked about it ourselves in precisely those terms? Suddenly I wonder if there has ever been a slap-on label that skews interpretation more badly than this one keeps doing, century upon century?
- p. The key point, the midnight "Duh": "Take up [your] cross" is *not* a call to discipleship. It's rather a call to say uncle; to quit the pretense; to face the facts. "You've got a cross. It's at your feet. You've been weighed in the balance already, and the verdict is in: 'Found wanting.' What you now call life is nothing more than the shamble of dead meat walking. Your fate is fixed." Why ever would you follow behind me, Jesus asks, if you *haven't* faced up to that?
- q. One might say, then, that taking up [your] cross is at most a prelude to discipleship, a necessary precondition to tagging along with Jesus if that

tagging along is to make any sense at all. Why “follow behind,” sticking to him like glue? Because Jesus is the Christ, the only one out there who’s able to make an Easter for crucified corpses. Key to that, of course, will be his exclusive role in shaping God’s judgment on sinners. He’ll do this not by overthrowing the judgment that already stands, whisking my cross away with a flick of some sort of magic wand. (We’d like him to do that, of course, a silly and faithless sentiment that connects us to Luke’s criminal on the left, cf. 23:39: “If you are the Real Deal, save yourself, and us!”) Instead he’ll lay the groundwork for a second and subsequent verdict. Resurrection. New creation. Eternal life for those who were dead. Gifts impossible, inexplicable, and yet so certain that we can talk about them in the same present tense that we use for the current death-march.

- r. No wonder Jesus chews Peter out for pushing a lesser agenda (Mark 8:33). No wonder he barks at him to “Get behind me!” No wonder he invites all the other Death Road denizens to tag along (“Follow behind me”), having first pointed them to the one and only sufficient reason for doing that (“Quit kidding yourself! Quit ignoring your cross! Grab hold of it! “Take it up!”).
- s. Need I observe that the above will preach to anybody and everybody—rich/poor, old/young, happy/bitter, respectable/despicable? All have fallen short of the glory of God, and every sinner dies. If one reads the text for what it says, there’s no longer any need to wrap oneself in knots trying to make it applicable.
- t. Come to think of it, the knotty, contorted arguments

that characterize the standard “cross-as-suffering” readings are a sure sign that they’re off the mark.

- u. By contrast, the “cross-as-verdict” reading throws open the door for telling the excellent and exciting news of Christ crucified for us, and in that telling, to invite some robust faith in him. And when the preaching is done and folks are home, they’ll be able to sit around the dinner table thanking God for good news heard that day, on Christ’s account. Isn’t that the surest sign of a reading that’s on the mark?

Jerome Burce
Fairview Park, Ohio

How the Parable of the Good Samaritan is Good News, aka Gospel

Colleagues,

The Parable of the Good Samaritan has been featured before in Thursday Theology, most recently in 2013, via [a sermon by Candice Stone](#). Luke was the featured Gospel in the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) that year, as it will be, once again, when Advent rolls around a mere four and a half months from now. In pulpits that follow the RCL, the parable itself is next scheduled for attention on July 10, 2016.

So our point in dispatching yet another reading of the parable

this week is not give preachers more arrows for their quiver, or hearers an alternative to preaching that's off the mark. Our aim is more basic: to toss all of you another example of how to chew on a bit of Scripture until the sweet juices of genuine Gospel start flooding your mouth.

Today's morsel comes from that Master of Mastication, Ed Schroeder. He shared it with us a week or so ago. We quickly saw that we couldn't keep it to ourselves.

Ed is writing to Bill Burrows, former editor of Orbis Books—missiology is their specialty—and a wonderful friend of Crossings, who has blessed two of our biennial conferences with superb reflections on the topic at hand. Bill had told him about a first rate presentation, at the recent annual meeting of the [American Society of Missiology](#), about the way the Good Samaritan parable has been read and heard in the church over the years. It included (said Bill) a proposal for reading it with an inter-religious and missiological perspective in mind. This latter note caught Ed's attention and prompted what you're about to read here. In responding to Bill, he said he got it straight from Martin Luther.

As you read, bear in mind that all of us are living in cultures that feature a plethora of religious and "spiritual" options, where the latter term designates any conception of ultimate reality that a person holds to be true. Does it need to be argued that every person alive is possessed of such a conception? If so, we'll reserve that argument for another time. For now, we simply commend Ed's final comments as a test and filter for any and every faith commitment one may encounter, be they cloaked in religious garb or not. Increasingly, they are not.

Two notes on procedure: first, as an aid to your digestion we've

prefaced Ed's comments with the text in question, Luke 10:25-37. Second, and for the same reason, we've done some mild editing to Ed's prose, adding text references at appropriate points, and here and there inserting translations for some Greek and Latin words. Those of you who don't read Greek will want to pay particular attention to Ed's first paragraph, where his accounting of the key term *nomikos* is sufficiently clear (we thought) that we left it untouched in the rest of the piece.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

How the Parable of the Good Samaritan is Good News, aka Gospel

by Ed Schroeder

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 26He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 27He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' 28And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' 30Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him

and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' 37He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' –Luke 10

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1. The guy asking Jesus for counsel is a *nomikos*, a "lawyer" in standard English translation. Whatever that all might have meant in Luke's first-century vocabulary, *nomos*—law—is the root word. Do's and don't's. Performance. That's what *nomos* is about.
2. Luke's *nomikos* knows the fundamental law, recites it verbatim (10:27). He says he needs help with the second great commandment, i.e. neighbor-love. Who, who all, qualifies as neighbor (10:29)?
3. Implication: apparently the first great commandment, God-love, is "no sweat." Seems he's got no problem understanding and fulfilling that one. Well, maybe—let's see what happens in the parable.
4. But here Luke already gives a huge clue. Our *nomikos* is "wanting to justify himself" (10:29). Wait a minute. Justifying folks is God's exclusive turf. Hmm. So in self-justifying is he already breaking the first commandment? Ouch! Isn't that even bigger trouble than mere confusion about the second one? Seems plausible. Let's see how the parable itself diagnoses the questioner—a thing Jesus regularly does in Lukan parables.
5. So where is the *nomikos* in the parable? Answer: he's the guy in the ditch, already half-dead. How so?
6. He's been dumped there by his law-addiction. Self-

justification is first-commandment-breaking. That he dares “to test Jesus” (10:25) is a signal of this. First-commandment-breaking is lethal. Paul, once a first-rate *nomikos* in his own right, will later expand autobiographically about the law’s deceptiveness in apparently urging self-justification, which spills, ironically and inevitably, into first-commandment breaking. When our story’s *nomikos* is eventually robbed—of his accumulated self-justifying self-righteousness, a thing Jesus does to people throughout Luke, especially in the parables (see e.g. the Pharisee and publican, or the two lost sons)—neither the priest nor the Levite, agents of the *nomos*-religion of the day, can offer any help. Half-dead, he’s deserted by them, soon to be all-dead.

7. Comes now the outsider, Jesus of Nazareth, derided as a “Samaritan” (John 8:48), not living/speaking kosher according to the Torah-temple-teachers (cf. 6:1ff.). He patently works outside the *nomikos*-ethos, offering non-*nomikos* healing—*splangchnon* in Luke’s Greek term, i.e. gutsy mercy, compassion (10:33). The guy revives, survives.
8. Now the switcheroo at the very end, typical of parable form: “Who acted as neighbor,” Jesus asks. Not “Who is the neighbor to be acted upon?” as the *nomikos* first put it.
9. Who acted as neighbor? the compassionate Samaritan, aka, Mercy-Messiah Jesus. This Outsider (Samaritan Jesus) is the neighbor to be loved, and in so doing—wonder of wonders!—you will also be fulfilling the first commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all”
10. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus adds. This is not “Be the Samaritan,” but rather, be the guy in the ditch (which you already are) and do likewise, as he did, in letting the Samaritan “neighbor” you with the mercy/compassion of God.
11. Said Samaritan, “good” indeed, is the one talking with

you. Stop “testing” him, i.e. “do repentance” (cf. 10:13, 11:32), and let him anoint you with his *splangchnon*, that gutsy mercy and compassion. That, dear *nomikos*, is where the “life that lasts” is at hand, standing right in front of you, the “eternal life” that you spoke illogically about in wanting to “do” something to “inherit” it (10:25). Though to stick for a moment with your mixed metaphor, what you’ve “got to do,” is get into the family where the legacy is, and then you inherit it as a freebee. Samaritan Jesus is the one who himself has those family connections and is intent on getting everybody so connected. Let him neighbor you into the family that inherits eternal life.

12. All of which is re-worded in the Mary/Martha codicil immediately following (10:38ff)

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How might this “Samaritan dipstick” pay off in our mission-minded conversation with folks of other religions and belief-systems?

1. Anticipate that non-Samaritan religions will be *nomikos*-proposals for getting the “life that lasts.” Make *this* the primal focus of listening to “the other,” and not their “god-concept” or other noetic items.
2. Is the promise offered in a practiced religion a *nomos*-promise? “If you . . . then God . . . ” Or is the operational promise offered there moving toward, close to, the Christian promise. “Since God in Christ . . . therefore you . . . ”? And if “close,” how close?
3. Anticipate, and check out, if/whether/how that operational promise still leaves the other robbed of the life that lasts, the life which the promise of the Samaritan-messiah promise is offering. [To Mark Hein’s point about the “variety of salvations” in world

religions: not everybody is going up the same mountain. Nirvana and union with the Trinity are distinctly different summits. There are various mountains. The actual mountain of Christian salvation may well be completely unknown, never seen on the Sierra Religiosa range where the other has been living.

4. Take clues from the Letter to the Hebrews, with its analysis of “comparative promises,” to articulate a winsome re-wording of the Christian promise for the truster of some other promise. As the Hebrews-writer does, take the “better” promise that came with the “outsider” priest Melchizedek, and show how it was filled-full in the flesh, in and through the outsider Samaritan Jesus. Which fulfillment now constitutes the meat and essence of his promise.

Augsburg and Charleston

Colleagues,

I don't suppose that too many U.S. Lutherans paused this past Thursday—this post's putative date, when it was supposed to have gotten to you—to recall its significance as the anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. The talk in this country this past week was about the murders in Charleston the week before. Those of us who serve as pastors of ELCA congregations got an email on Wednesday from our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, asking us to make the coming Sunday, June 28th, a day of repentance and mourning. As I finally get to compiling this post, it's now the evening of that day.

So here's what I'm sending you tonight. First is the public statement that Bishop Eaton issued on June 18, the day after the murders. Her note on Wednesday asked us to read this to our congregations, and so I did. Next comes the homily I preached when I was done reading. The aim here was to sharpen the reflection, bearing in mind that I was stringing words and thoughts together not for the general public—thus the bishop—but for a couple of groups of profoundly serious Christian people who, like the confessors at Augsburg, are committed to the struggle to believe the Gospel that sinners are justified by faith in Christ crucified and risen. So how does that good news inform our perception of what happened in Charleston and shape our response to it? Those were the key questions I tried to address. I did so hastily, provisionally. Ten minutes after being done I thought of lots of things I should have said but didn't say for all the usual reasons: the preaching time was short, the preaching preps too scanty, the preaching person insufficient for so weighty a task. So be it. I pass it along anyway as piece of rough, unfinished work that may nonetheless have something in it that you'll appreciate.

Before I get to these things a couple of notes.

First, reader Marvin Huggins sent me the following response to last week's post, number 855: "A bit of a correction to Ed's piece: Jim Burkee is now at Concordia, Bronxville, not Mequon/Milwaukee." Thanks for that.

Second, the Augsburg anniversary prompts a mention of two things you'll want to know about if you don't already. One is the "Luther Reading Challenge," launched a few months ago by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg with the cooperation of Augsburg Fortress and Concordia Publishing House. *Lutheran Forum* editor Sarah Wilson seems to be driving the project. It's billed as a way to honor and prepare for the

forthcoming (2017) 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and is [certainly worth a glance](#)—and more. (I've been pitching it to folks in my congregation who show particular interest in grabbing hold of their Lutheran roots.) The other is the recent publication, by Augsburg Fortress, of a two volume [collection of works by Johannes Bugenhagen](#), assembled and translated by Kurt Hendel of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, and, prior to that, of Seminex. Kurt had been working on this project for years, if not decades. Thanks be to God for its fruition.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

On the Murders in Charleston: [Bishop Eaton's Statement](#)

June 18, 2015

It has been a long season of disquiet in our country. From Ferguson to Baltimore, simmering racial tensions have boiled over into violence. But this . the fatal shooting of nine African Americans in a church is a stark, raw manifestation of the sin that is racism. The church was desecrated. The people of that congregation were desecrated. The aspiration voiced in the Pledge of Allegiance that we are “one nation under God” was desecrated.

Mother Emanuel AME's pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, was a graduate of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, as was the Rev. Daniel Simmons, associate pastor at Mother Emanuel. The suspected shooter is a member of an ELCA congregation. All of a sudden and for all of us, this is an intensely personal tragedy. One of our own is alleged to have shot and killed two who adopted us as their own.

We might say that this was an isolated act by a deeply disturbed man. But we know that is not the whole truth. It is not an isolated event. And even if the shooter was unstable, the framework upon which he built his vision of race is not. Racism is a fact in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact are deadly. The Rev. Mr. Pinckney leaves a wife and children. The other eight victims leave grieving families. The family of the suspected killer and two congregations are broken. When will this end?

The nine dead in Charleston are not the first innocent victims killed by violence. Our only hope rests in the innocent One, who was violently executed on Good Friday. Emmanuel, God with us, carried our grief and sorrow – the grief and sorrow of Mother Emanuel AME church – and he was wounded for our transgressions – the deadly sin of racism.

I urge all of us to spend a day in repentance and mourning. And then we need to get to work. Each of us and all of us need to examine ourselves, our church and our communities. We need to be honest about the reality of racism within us and around us. We need to talk and we need to listen, but we also need to act. No stereotype or racial slur is justified. Speak out against inequity. Look with newly opened eyes at the many subtle and overt ways that we and our communities see people of color as being of less worth. Above all pray – for insight, for forgiveness, for courage.

Kyrie Eleison.

On the Murders in Charleston: Burce's Homily

This past Wednesday the pastors of the ELCA got an email from our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, asking all of us to read the public statement she issued on June 18, the day after those

terrible murders in that church in Charleston, South Carolina. So let me do that . . .

Now if you were here last week you heard me talk about these things. If I talk about them again, it's because they bear repeating. Do they ever.

In her statement, Bishop Eaton asks us for two responses to what happened. Repentance is one of them. The other is mourning.

Let's start with repentance. Repentance means getting your head straight. It means getting your heart turned around. In the Bible repentance means seeing things the way God sees them. It means listening to God and taking him seriously. Above all, and in the end, repentance means taking Christ Jesus seriously as the One God has sent to redefine who we are; to make us into people we are not, and couldn't be without him.

"If anyone is in Christ, he, she, is new creation. Look! The old has passed away. The new has come." We heard that from St. Paul two weeks ago. If you were here then, you might recall that Paul was saying this to people who had heard that very thing many times before, only they hadn't bothered yet to take it all that seriously.

It's time to open your eyes, Paul says. It's way past time to get your wits together—or rather to let the Holy Spirit do that for you as you pay attention to what God is saying about how things really are in the world today on Christ's account.

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So a week ago last Wednesday, a baptized young man, raised in a church just like ours, schooled in the same Bible stories, the same catechism, the same liturgy of Word and Sacrament that we use right here—that young man walks into another church, and by the time he's done nine people lie dead.

As he sat there with them for that hour of Bible study, I don't suppose it once crossed his mind that he was sitting there with members of his own family. And when he pulled out the gun and started firing, I don't suppose it occurred to him that he was shooting Jesus in the face. But that of course is absolutely what happened. "Whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do it to me." That's how God defines what's real in today's world, a world that Jesus rules, God having raised him from the dead to rule it.

Now do I think for a moment that anybody here at Messiah would do as the young man did? Not at all. Even by sinners' standards, shooting nine people dead is a horrible aberration. But having said that, I do know that every person here, myself included, suffers to one extent or another from the same lack of vision, the same failure of faith, that the young man exhibited.

We don't see as God sees. We don't trust the Word that God keeps putting in our ears to shape our vision, and to correct it.

So, for example, I wonder what would happen here at Messiah if, one Wednesday evening, a young stranger—a young black stranger to use that awful black-white thing we're so stuck on in this country—I wonder what would happen if that young man were to wander in to a Bible study that was unfolding around the conference table in the room that's just below us. What would we see, those of us who were sitting there? Would we see a brother, or at the very least a potential brother? Or would we see a threat? A black threat? A person in a place where he has no business being? How many minutes would go by, I wonder, before someone snuck away from the table to call the police to come check this fellow out?

To me, one of the most remarkable things about that story from Charleston is the way the people there welcomed the young man

around their table. They, at least, were using the eyes of faith—their faith in Jesus. Or so it seems.

And the day after the horror, some of their dear ones were using the same eyes of faith in Jesus as they told the young man about their readiness to forgive him for his terrible crime. This startled the world; you may have noticed. It didn't necessarily please the world. In one column I read last week the writer was angry with the relatives for having said what they said—for having dared, that is, to let white racists off the hook again.

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For our part this morning, here at Messiah, let's make a point of thanking God for the witness of the saints. Those saints. The ones in Charleston. Our brothers. Our sisters. That's who they were, in Christ. That's who they are, in Christ.

So we're going to do that at the end of the prayers today, the same way we do it on All Saint's Sunday when we remember the saints of our own congregation. I'll call the names. The bell will toll. And when you hear the bell toll, let it do what bells in church are also meant to do, which is to pull us into prayer.

Please join me this week—join with Bishop Eaton—in asking the Lord of the Church to bless every Christian in the land with the same set of eyes he blessed those Christians with—the ones who died, that is, and their dear ones too.

Ask him to heal our vision, so that right here at Messiah we make progress in seeing what God sees as he looks at all of us through the lens of Christ crucified. St. Paul again, Galatians 3 this time: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female"—and for sure there is no black and white: what nonsense is that? "For all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you

belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise," sons and daughters of God Most High, no less.

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Let me close with a confession. I get grim sometimes, even despairing, over the possibility that Americans—so-called white Americans like me in particular—will ever get past our wicked addiction to sorting people according to color. I do know that the rivers of words, some angry, some penitent, that have been gushing in our public conversation this past week are not going to make it happen.

In this morning's Gospel we heard of a woman with an illness that all the doctors in the world couldn't cure. In her madness, her faithful desperation, she touched the robe of Jesus. And with that, she was a new woman.

Right here, this morning, there is more for you to touch than Jesus' robe. Here is his body, given for you. Here is his blood, shed for you. Here is forgiveness for your sin and folly, and with it is strength and correction for weak and feeble eyes.

Notice, after all, what's going on here: how the Word of God is prodding us to see Christ, and no one less than Christ, in all these people who are eating and drinking him in. That certainly includes you. It includes everyone else who is eating and drinking with you. So whose face will we be wearing as we step through those doors at the end of the service? And won't the same be true of every other person in America who's been meeting and touching Jesus this morning the way we are here?

So suppose that all these baptized, eating-and-drinking, tasting-and-touching people were to spend this coming week remembering whose face they were exhibiting to the public out there, strangers as well as friends? And suppose that, in their

joy and wonder, they were all determined not to embarrass their Lord—this Jesus who, with such inexplicable grace and power, has made their face to be his face, their voice to be his voice, their behavior to be his behavior?

So now there are millions of people out there shining stubbornly with the light of Christ and respecting it in others, the way those saints in Charleston did, and continue to do. Can you imagine what a holy and blessed difference that would make in the tenor of our land these days?

“Your faith has saved you,” Jesus says to the woman. God grant such faith to us all. Amen.

Ed Schroeder on the Tim Frakes Documentary, “Semtex: Memories of a Church Divided”

Colleagues,

I sit down to write with the news of Wednesday night’s obscenity at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston hanging heavy in the air. It stinks. It oppresses. It calls in the present space for a bellow of angry protest—against whom, or what?—and after that for a stream of thoughtful words about God’s Law and God’s Gospel as they pertain to this particular instance of the greater stench that we’re choking to death in. I write and think slowly, so that stream of words hasn’t come together yet. Perhaps it will in coming days. If so, I’ll stick my neck out and share it with you. For now I’ll continue with the topic that was already in

the works before the news broke. May the saints in Christ who lie so suddenly shot and slaughtered forgive me for that. So too for those who mourn them most nearly and deeply this morning. I mean them no disrespect by carrying on. God forbid such a thing!

This much I will offer, that when our own words fail, the Lord provides. Here are four: "Deliver us from evil." May that be the Church's chief prayer throughout America this week—in all the world, for that matter; and with Christ in view, may the praying be as confident as it is urgent.

+ + +

So today we send you a brief musing by Ed Schroeder about the controversy in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that produced the phenomenon called Seminex. Ed's note was sparked by a new documentary on the subject that appeared this past February from [Tim Frakes Productions](#), Tim Frakes being the former principal videographer of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Why this topic, and why now? For that we refer you to [Frakes's own words](#).

I haven't seen the documentary yet. I will soon, because it's suddenly on my "must buy" list. Saying that, let me also commend it to any of you who don't know the Seminex story. I know, it's reckless to tout something I haven't vetted for myself, but you may as well start somewhere, and the Seminex story is worth learning. It's a compelling tale on its own merits, and if you want to make sense of the configuration of U.S. Lutheranism in 2015, it's a story you've simply got to know.

And why did it happen? Ah, there's the rub, an issue that Ed takes up below. He's writing to Thelda Bertram, widow of Robert W. Bertram, who, on watching Frakes's film, wondered why her husband didn't appear in it anywhere. Good question. Those of us who were there in 1974 will recall that Bob was the principal spokesman for the faculty majority and a key architect of the

theological rationale for the faculty's stance. So Frakes leaves him out? Odd indeed, as Ed points out. Still, no matter. You can go to YouTube these days to see video of Bob in action in '74. Search on "Seminex." Or see the link at the end of Ed's piece.

Finally, a bit of editor's candor. A couple of decades ago I argued in *Lutheran Forum* that issues of class and culture were the key drivers of that mid-70's LCMS rift. I'm still convinced of that. Apparently Frakes argues along similar lines. Ed isn't buying it, as you'll quickly see. Does this put me at odds with my old teacher? Not all that much, I think, and for reasons that have everything to do with Ed. Amid the tumult of those days, no one did more than he to help this particular student discern the stunning aroma of genuine Gospel; and once you've caught that, it becomes obvious how much theology does matter. Good theology, the kind that opens the bottle and allows Gospel to permeate the world's stench (see above, re. Charleston) is always worth a hard, tough fight. A losing fight, even.

Have we forgotten that? I sometimes wonder.

Peace and joy regardless,
Jerry Burce

Ed Schroeder to Thelda Bertram, on the absence of her husband, Bob Bertram, from Tim Frakes's [Seminex: Memories of a Church Divided](#)—

Our guess is that Tim Frakes, the filmmaker, has his own picture of what *Seminex* was all about. This is *his* story of what it was. So he chose tapes from the past to paste together with his interviews of survivors (done last summer at LSTC at *Seminex*'s 40th birthday party)—to tell *his* story. And *his* story is that it was a churchly sample of the overall turmoil in the US in the

1970s. Vietnam, women's rights, civil rights, etc. On the one side, old traditionalists trying to hold on to the past; on the other, new energy from "new" people unsatisfied with the past, with the way things have always been.

Frakes makes James C. Burkee, LCMS prof today at Concordia, Milwaukee, the major voice for such interpretation. It's sociological, cultural, political. "The times they are a-changing!" So, no surprise, there's conflict. In the church too.

Here's how Amazon describes Burkee's 2013 book, [Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod](#): "[Burkee] follows the rise of two Lutheran clergymen—Herman Otten and J. A. O. Preus—who led different wings of a conservative movement that seized control of a theologically conservative but socially and politically moderate church denomination (LCMS) and drove "moderates" from the church in the 1970s. The schism within what was then one of the largest Protestant denominations in the United States ultimately reshaped the landscape of American Lutheranism and fostered the polarization that characterizes today's Lutheran churches."

This might well be the reason why Herman Otten is so prominent in the documentary. In Burkee's book there are pages and pages about Herman.

The voice which does (gently) focus on the theology (Blessed Bob's turf) is Jack Preus's grandson Gerhard Bode, now a history prof at Concordia Seminary. And he's basically "friendly" to Seminex in what he says. Isn't that something!

But Frakes doesn't give us any past taped footage of that facet of the story of Seminex, to show us what Bode is talking about. Here Bob Bertram's voice would have been the major one. Ev Kalin does make the cut in the documentary with his "It was about the Gospel. I really believe that." In my interview with Frakes I

think I tried to make that point too, but Frakes didn't use that footage. And some of the former students—now all gray-haired—say gospel-focused things. But that's all we get in the 42 minutes.

Here's my hunch about that. The theology of the Seminex conflict is not easy to convey in any re-telling the story. Even in Burkee's book that gets scant attention. Remember how true that was also at the very time it all happened? This is a "time for confessing," Bob said. And many folks (even among us moderates, even within Seminex) at that time too said "Huh? What's that?" "Nah, it's just Power, Politics and the Missouri Synod." Dear [Pete Pero's](#) words from those days: "It's turf war. You guys blew it. You should've held on to the turf, the 801 campus!" Even the Tietjen segment in the flick: "Two different views of the church. Outward-looking, mission-minded vs. insular." True. But that's not yet what Kalin says in his clip. Nor was it Bob's constant drumbeat.

To "show" people that it was a conflict in theology, a time for confessing, "about the Gospel," as Kalin says, was tough then, has always been tough throughout church history, and is still tough now. It takes a lot of time. It regularly means that you have to show folks, first of all, just what the gospel is. And that often means "violating" what they think Gospel is, their "Vorverständnis" (one of Bob's favored terms ["prior understanding"]). All of which takes time, regularly a loooooong time.

Frakes seeks to tell the whole story in 42 minutes. That's not enough time to "show" folks the conflict "about the Gospel" that was really at the center of that whole story. So there's still a "hole" in the whole story that Frakes gives us. Footage from Bob would have filled in some of that hole. [*Editor's note: [see YouTube.](#)*]

Peace and joy!

Ed

Editor's post-script—

Back to Charleston. The words are gushing in torrents as they always do. For something as close to a word of God's Law as you'll find anywhere in the secular sphere, see, of all people, [Jon Stewart on Comedy Central](#).

Getting Back on Track, with a Report from the Mockingbird Conference

Colleagues,

Nine dry Thursdays. That's what you've gotten since Maundy Thursday, when we last posted. It's not the first break you've seen in what's meant to be a weekly sequence, but it's certainly the longest. Other tasks have intruded. So has a stubborn writer's block.

To say that we're back on track would be promising too much. So we'll say instead that we're trying again. We're able today to tell you about some folks who, as of 2007, are suddenly touting the distinction between law and gospel in U.S. Episcopal circles. Those of you who identify as conscientious Lutherans—that's most of you, we're guessing—will find this refreshing, and perhaps exciting. It's certainly something for

you to know about. Beyond that, we have a few other items in the hopper for you. We'll get them on their way in coming weeks.

Steven Kuhl wrote today's report for the Crossings' Board of Directors, which dispatched him to New York City this past April to check out the annual spring conference of [a group called Mockingbird](#). Board members Marcus Felde and Steve Albertin had been there two years earlier, and had come away convinced that Crossings would do well to develop some connections with the group. Steve, as you'll see, arrived at the same conclusion. Because he's writing for the Board, you'll find him lapsing at a certain point into some in-house shorthand that pertains to the Crossings six-step method for reading Biblical texts and assessing theological issues. To help you through that, here's a quick review:

D-1/D-2/D-3 are levels of "diagnosis," as in "what the Law exposes." In light of that Law, what ails the sinners God seeks to save? Beneath sores on life's surface (level 1) lie sores of the untrusting heart (level 2), which signal a deeper wound—deadly, beyond our capacity to heal—in our relationship with God (level 3).

P-4/-P-5/P-6 are levels of "prognosis," as in "what the Gospel promises and delivers," namely God's will and work to heal. Comes first, in Christ crucified, the healing of that fundamental wound between God and sinners (level 4), the announcement of which leads, by the Spirit's grace, to healed and trusting hearts (level 5), which give rise in turn to healed behaviors on the surface of life (level 6). We keep insisting at Crossings that there is no real healing at that final surface level until one has faced the dread of D-3 and tumbled to the wonder of P-4. Or to put that plainly, you can't bark at somebody to start trusting God and expect that to happen if you don't bother to show them how God in Christ has dealt, and is

dealing still, with the deep-down issues that have driven the lack of trust in the first place.

With that as preface, we give you Steve.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Report on My Experience at the Mockingbird Conference

by Steven Kuhl

1. Thank you [to the board] for the opportunity to go to the Mockingbird Conference [in my capacity of the Executive Director of Crossings]. Overall, it was refreshing to hear people so excited about the importance of distinguishing law and gospel as a way to make the gospel clear. They are truly kindred spirits. My understanding of them not only grows out of the conference and its various presentations, but from the new book Mockingbird just published (first released at the conference) called [Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners \(and Saints\)](#). It is a short book of 91 pages, written in simple language, in collaboration by the three full-time staff people of Mockingbird: William McDavid, Ethan Richardson and David Zahl. None them claim to be scholars, they offer the content of the book “for the purpose of commentary, study, discussion and critique.” I learned at the Mockingbird Conference that the organization is dedicated to the theological outlook its founders learned from Paul Zahl (David’s father) who studied for his doctorate in Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen. Paul served most of his ministry as a parish priest, before becoming the Dean of the

Cathedral in Birmingham, Alabama, (from 1994-2004), where he became known as a great preacher. In 2004 he also became known for his visible protest of the ordination of Gene Robinson to the Episcopate (flying a black flag over the Cathedral in Birmingham), causing some tensions in the community. In that same year he left that post to become the Dean and President at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, a seminary of the "Evangelical Wing" of the Episcopal Church that now does double duty of serving both the ECUSA and the NALC. He served as Dean and President until resigning in 2007 for personal reasons. He then took the position of Rector of All Saints Church in Chevy Chase until his retirement in 2009. Paul is a prolific writer, intent on bringing Reformation thought to bear on modern times. (For biographical basics and a list of his books, [click here](#).) Mockingbird Ministries was founded in 2007 by David Zahl, Paul's son, with the intention of relating faith and modern culture using the law-gospel theological outlook as taught by the elder Zahl. David, Mockingbird's full-time executive director, also works on the staff of Christ Episcopal Church, Charlottesville, VA, where he supervises their ministry to students and young adults. He published his first book, [*A Mess of Help: From the Crucified Soul of Rock and Roll*](#), in 2014. He has a keen interest in connecting the gospel to modern music and culture.

2. The conference was held in old St. George Episcopal Church building (of the Calvary-St. George Parish in Manhattan), a massive structure that was built with Carnegie money in the 19th century. I arrived there early and had a chance to introduce myself to David Zahl and talk to him about Crossings. I was impressed that he remembered both Marcus Felde and Steve Albertin from their attendance at a previous Mockingbird Conference. He was gracious and

allowed me to display both the Crossings brochure I had made as well as two separate newsletters I had brought along. The conference consisted of plenary session presentations (a half hour in length) and breakout sessions (an hour in length) that covered a variety of topics. Each plenary session started out with a homily/devotion given by Jim Munroe. They were excellent. The end of each session was followed by a magician/comedy act to bring a little levity to the event. The plenary sessions were of two different types. Some were theological and some were cultural. I found it odd that there was no Q&A after the plenary presentations. The only exception was with Nadia Bolz-Weber, which I'll talk about later. Those in attendance tended to be an even mix of 30 to 60 somethings. In general, I believe they said there were about 150 in attendance for the whole conference. The exception was Friday night (7 p.m.) when the featured speaker of the Conference, Nadia Bolz-Weber, spoke. Attendance then was about 300.

3. The theological presentations, I thought, were good, although they were mixed with regard to depth of theological understanding, especially as I listened to them through the template of our own Crossings Matrix. The common theme was the Gospel as UNCONDITIONAL grace and it was related clearly to language of the conference title, "Clean Slate: Absolution in Real Life." The Gospel as forgiveness was the dominant image. The best presentations were the first one, given by Jacob Smith (rector of Calvary-St. George Parish and founding member of the board of Mockingbird) and the last presentation by David Zahl, which was very winsome and theologically superb. Although there was virtually nothing said explicitly about what we call "the crossing from D-3 to P-4," it was implied, at least by David Zahl. In personal conversation he affirmed

the idea D-3 and said it was the presupposition of his substitutionary understanding of the atonement, P-4. Sin exacts a debt before God and forgiveness comes at a cost to God, the death of Christ. The point is that Christ pays the cost, not us. In general, the human malady, as the speakers presented it, focused on human self-centeredness (D-2) and they frequently cited the image of being "turned-in-on-self" used by both Augustine and Luther. This malady tended to manifest itself in two ways: by our desire to justify ourselves by way of the law (manifested often by moralism and "busyness," both of which dilute the law of God) and by our aversion to the idea that we need forgiveness (i.e., the idea that we are OK because we do our best). But as all the speakers also made clear, such pretentiousness is illusory because they underestimated the extent of the law's demand, which was presented as "be perfect as God is perfect," an impossible demand to meet. Numerous illustrations were given to show this malady at work in our culture. They are very good at mining the culture for illustrations. At best this fixation on "fulfilling the law" dulls our senses and, at worst, fuels our anxieties. It can never bring true "satisfaction."

The gospel, by contrast, was generally presented as a word in stark contrast to the law and generally in counter-cultural terms: "counter," not in the sense of "anti-," i.e. purely negative about what is going on in today's culture (as is typical of conservative fundamentalist types of Christianity) but in terms of combating the moralism and justification by busyness that pervades our culture. The gospel is sympathetic to those held captive under law, and law is the defining feature of culture. Missing was the tension about the law being not only that which kills, but also that which gives some measure of "security" as a law of retribution—Luther's "political

use”—to this fallen world. (See Werner Elert’s [Law and Gospel](#), 14-15. [Editor’s note: this superb booklet has long been out of print; [a synopsis is available online](#), courtesy of Singapore theologian Martin Yee.]) Likewise missing was Bob Bertram’s idea of the law as the Creator’s critical support network, and the paradox that “we can’t live with it and we can’t live without it.” Without that idea and paradox, Mockingbird’s argument becomes vulnerable, I think, to the charge of antinomianism, a charge of which they are aware and that they try to address (Mockingbird, *Law and Gospel*, p. 85-6). Presenters were also explicit in criticizing the purpose-driven outlook of Rick Warren and the prosperity gospel of Joel Osteen.

The gospel as presented focused on grace alone (as forgiveness and Justification) and Christ alone (as the Giver of this grace), but there was no talk of “faith alone.” That made me think about the language of “unconditional grace” that dominated the talks. It sounded more like Calvin’s “unconditional election” or modernism’s “universalism” (see Bertram’s [A Time for Confessing](#), p. 172-183) than Luther’s “justification by faith.” I don’t think they intend that, but more thought is needed on the interrelationship of the THREE “alone’s” of the gospel. (“Faith alone” is also conspicuously absent in their new book, *Law and Gospel*.) Still, in Mockingbird’s telling there is a “condition” that applies to grace – and it is faith! “By faith you have been saved...” (Eph. 2:8). The caveat is that while this “faith” is not our creation, it is a creation of the Word and the Spirit (contra [Arminianism’s](#) accent on free will), it is certainly our possession (as Luther underscores); and as our possession it constitutes the new foundation (as faith

in Christ) out of which we live (because Christ and the Spirit are present and active in us by faith). Beyond that, there seems to be little talk about P-5. However, talk of P-6 as “the fruit of the Spirit” was a very important theme and correlating it to D-1 (the cultural specifics) was very evident. That’s where Mockingbird’s interest in relating faith and culture comes in loud and clear. Cultural studies are very important to them for correlating the gospel’s answer to the culture’s question. Though no explicit reference was made to Tillich, I thought I could hear his method of correlation at work in their law-gospel method. In addition, the Mockingbird *Law and Gospel* has a huge section on the “Fruits of the Gospel” and a very overt critique of the “third use of law” which has become the dominant way of clouding the gospel today. I’m going to quote their footnote on this at length, because I think it is so good.

The “third use of the Law,” which occupies a tiny spot in John Calvin’s work and is nonexistent in Luther’s, means that the Law is needed as a motivational tool—like a whip to a “lazy sluggish donkey” (Calvin)—to spur the believer to good works. It’s needed as a guide. This “third use” has exercised enormous influence in Christianity over the years. In Protestantism, it has grown from a page and half in Calvin’s 1100-page work to the primary theme in many church pulpits. Either it is assumed that the Gospel of forgiveness is for non-Christians in the congregation or for relatively new believers, but after a while, our main focus should be on living a better life [as defined by the law]. This is probably not the dominant theme in Christian history, and it is certainly not one in the work of the Reformers. But because the human heart is always inclined to the Law, to wanting rules and conditions so that we may

exercise control, the theme crops up regularly. (p. 63)

In this regard, understanding P-6 as the fruit of faith/Gospel and not as the work of the third use of the law, Crossings and Mockingbird are natural allies. Indeed, if you look online at the numerous groups and sites that call themselves “confessional Lutherans” today, you will see that many of them tend to assert their “confessional pedigree” by arguing *for* the “third use of the law,” making the law the guide to the Christian life, and *against* those of us who consistently apply the distinction of law and gospel to say that “the Holy Spirit is the guide of the Christian Life. Mockingbird rightly calls this Spirit-guided life a life of freedom (because sin in the heart is conquered and love arises by inward movement of Christ and the Spirit) and the law-driven life a life as slavery (because sin still reigns in the heart and it is subject to the punishment of the law). But in saying that, they would do well to clarify the character of the Christian as “at once entirely righteous and entirely sinful” (*toto simul iustus et peccator*).

4. The cultural presentations were interesting, but lacked connection to the theological themes. The speakers had impressive credentials. One, Jamin Warren, is a culture reporter for the Wall Street Journal and co-founder of video arts and culture company, “Kill Screen.” He spoke of online “gaming” as a model of Christian freedom (=we make up the rules). I found it interesting but not very helpful. It seems to me the video game phenomenon feeds our desire to “be like God” rather than frees us to be faithful disciples in God’s world. Another, Jim Gilmore, is a philosopher of business (of sorts) who co-founded Strategic Horizons, LLP, does adjunct lecturing at Darren Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia

and guest lectures at Westminster Seminary in California on Apologetics and Cultural Hermeneutics. He presented a typology of various kinds of hermeneutical lenses he is working on for looking at culture. Again, there was no real connection to the theme. No Q&A.

5. The major keynote speaker of the Conference was Nadia Bolz-Weber. She drew some three hundred to the conference at her Friday night, 7 p.m. presentation. She is certainly a rock star: an entertaining speaker, an in-your-face-kind of person, who tells stories of grace in a humorous stand-up comedic way. I've read her book [Pastrix](#) (will produce a review of it sometime), heard her speak on Wisconsin Public Radio (while in Madison for a speaking gig) and now heard her at Mockingbird. She certainly has a "grace alone" kind of theology and is an eloquent advocate for what one might call the "lepers" of our society (i.e., those who do not fit in) of which she counts herself as one. She speaks positively and intentionally about as being Lutheran, because it is the tradition where she heard all about "grace." She used familiar Lutheran language about justification, the theology of the cross, Christian freedom, and about being simultaneously sinners and saints throughout her presentation even as she refracts it through the theological lens of God wanting us to be ourselves, our own authentic selves. The foil over against which she speaks is the conservative, legalistic evangelical Christianity she grew up with—and rejected!—because of how it pietistically defined God as a punishing God and true Christians as those who exhibit a well-defined Christian personality-type. That is inauthentic in her mind. She started her presentation by giving (reading) a sermon she preached at her church on the "fall story" of Genesis 3, arguing that it is not a "fall story," but a "being duped story." From there she

went on to tell (humorous) stories of grace. She is very self-conscious about using her own life as a foil to show that even a “f___ up” like her can be acceptable to God while being herself. The point of the gospel and the desire of God is that we stop hurting ourselves, leading self-destructive lives, and become the selves God created us to be. I found very little “authentic” Law-Gospel theology in her message, appealing though it was. She explicitly criticized “atonement” theories in her talk, apparently believing the caricature of them as being akin to justifying divine child abuse, God getting his pound of flesh by punishing Jesus instead of us. The cross is the symbol of the “shit” we bring on ourselves or have to put up with from others, not the confrontation of the mercy of God with the wrath of God. God is monolithically love. Jesus’ crucifixion is the sign that God is always there with us in the midst of the muck. The point is to see that and to understand that that is what is to define us. What defines us is God’s unconditional love. I did ask David Zahl if he agreed with her rejection of D-3 and the idea of Christ’s atoning death, P-4. (I had not yet heard his excellent summing-up presentation.) He said he did not. He held to a “substitutionary” view of the atonement, which is stated in *Law and Gospel* and which came through in his excellent closing talk, but with no reference to Nadia. (He did reference things he liked about Nadia’s talk.) He went on to say that they did not necessarily bring her to the conference because they agreed with everything she said, but because they are interested in hearing what others have to say AND that she would draw a big crowd. In addition to Nadia’s talk, there was an interchange the next day between Nadia and Tullian Tchividjian, the Coral Ridge champion of Law-Gospel theology. I learned that Nadia and Tullian are “good” friends, though on the

opposite poles of the “moral questions” of our day, but nevertheless in sync on the message of the gospel of grace and the need to distinguish law and gospel to keep morality morality and gospel gospel. As they spoke, it sounded more and more to me like the idea of the “distinction” of law and gospel meant the “separation” of law and gospel, the way Jaroslav Pelikan used the word “separation” to describe the gnostic position in Volume 1 of [The Christian Tradition](#) (pp. 71-80). I hope my meaning is clear and that I am not misrepresenting what they said.

6. I’m going to stop my description here. As I said, I really enjoyed the Mockingbird conference and people, and think we have a lot in common. I also find them open to discussion and learning more about the art of distinguishing law and gospel in order to clarify the gospel and bring its liberating power to those burdened by law-laden modern culture. I hope we can find a way to network with them in bringing the law-gospel outlook to today’s church and world.

Peace,
Steve Kuhl

On Faith. Eleven Bertram Theses, Newly Unearthed.

Colleagues,

First, a passing thought—

I write this on Wednesday of Holy Week. Many of us listened this

past Sunday to St. Mark's account of our Lord's Passion. Many of us will listen again two days from now as St. John unfolds the story. The words will wash over us. We'll think. We'll pray. After that we'll go home and sleep as soundly as we usually do. At no point will it cross our minds that we're in some kind of imminent peril for daring to believe what we heard, and for having our public identities hooked to the Person we heard about.

To put that another way: not a one of us will face the temptation Peter succumbed to in the high priest's courtyard. Preachers, desperate to extract a soupcon of relevance from that episode for a middle-class U.S. audience, will sometimes suggest otherwise. They're merely pretending.

Elsewhere in the world are siblings in Christ who do know what Peter faced. They'll likely endure it this very week. The [current issue of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research](#) is devoted to their stories. I commend it to your perusing between now and Friday. Then, when our ears have landed us in the courtyard shadows with Peter babbling his denials a few elbows away, let's remember them, and pray for them, and thank God the Holy Spirit for the faith and grit that keeps them loyal.

And if that should cast a starker light on our own fecklessness as we stumble through our days in far safer places, so be it. Kyrie eleison. In the mystery of mysteries, Christ died for us too. Really, go figure!

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On to the main matter for today:

Cathy Lessmann is the manager of all things practical where Crossings is concerned. Some weeks ago, while sorting through some old files, she found a one-page rumination by the late

great Bob Bertram that she hadn't seen before. It's not posted in the [Bertram section](#) of Crossings' online library. She found no attending notes that gave the piece a context. It was simply there, a bit of work under an odd title that doesn't quite fit the ensuing content. So what, or whom, was Bob addressing? How exactly was Luther's Large Catechism involved, there being no mention of this beyond the title? Might this have been the start of a bigger and more extensive essay, an initial sketch of core ideas? Or was it Bob doing as some writers and thinkers will, putting thoughts on paper to get them sharpened and clarified, and finding no reason—it being written for him, no other audience intended—to go back and adjust the title once the thoughts had tumbled out?

Be all this as it may, we pass it along for your refreshment. It comes to you in one of Bob's favorite formats, a set of numbered paragraphs of similar length, one thought proceeding ineluctably to the next, every word chosen with obvious care. The topic is faith—faith as law, faith as gift, faith as the matter that will either make us or break us, as Bob writes in his opening sentence. And at the heart of the faith—the one faith, the only faith—that will keep us alive: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (cf. par. 9).

I'm hard-pressed to imagine a better gift for Holy Week this year. Read. Savor. Thank God.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

“Justification by Faith.” Is that in the Large Catechism? Well, sort of.

1. Faith can be good or bad, but it [is at last] what makes

or breaks us. For faith, whether good or bad, means “having a god.” And the god we trust is the god we’re stuck with, for good or bad.

2. That kind of retribution (we get what we believe in) is the Law of God. Whether we believe in *that* God or not, *his* is the Law which governs us: what we most love and trust (and fear), that is our god. God sees to that.
3. This God, the one true God, is the God whose tenfold command is his precondition, his righteous requirement. His precondition for what? For our getting and keeping his good will, including all his gifts. Call it “life.” “Do this and you shall live.” No righteousness, no life.
4. If we fail at righteousness (that is, I we disobey the command) we may still receive life, except in that case the life we receive we become indebted for. And the debt we incur, always more and more, we cannot ever repay, even by dying.
5. No wonder that the more conscientious we are about obeying the Creator’s command, the harder we find it to trust that we please and delight him. For obviously our lives are anything but *God-pleasing*.
6. Still, we are commanded not only to *be* pleasing to God but also to *believe* that we are. Yet if we did believe that, we would be lying, and we are also commanded not to lie.
7. Notice how the problem comes back to faith. The one faith we are commanded to have – namely the faith that we delight God – we cannot have, not only because we lack the strength to believe it but because, even if we could believe it, it would be untrue.
8. Enter Jesus the Christ. He still operates on the same premise of the Creator’s Law: “righteousness” is the precondition of “life”; no “righteousness,” no “life.”
9. But now, with Christ Jesus, the “righteousness” which earns us “life” is HIS righteousness. And the life that he

earns for us is HIS life. In exchange he accepts our sin and our death and calls it even.

10. Our unrighteousness is now hid or buried in Christ's righteousness and our lives in his life. No wonder that now we *believe* that we please God. For now we do, in this "joyous exchange," this Sweet Swap with Christ.
11. It is the Holying Spirit who gives us the power to believe that. But it is what God, the whole triune God, has done in Christ that makes the faith true in the first place.

Robert W. Bertram

November 9, 1993

Death, Life, and Baptism (3)

Colleagues,

Today brings the third installment of Craig Simenson's extended essay on baptism as God's best gift for the challenge of living well in the face of death. All God's gifts are woefully underused, and this one more than most, an observation that prompted Craig to write the essay in the first place. As we noted in the introduction to the [first installment](#), he aims finally to lay out a proposal for addressing that underuse through congregational worship practices. This constitutes the fourth part of his paper, which we won't get to here, at least not for now. I surmised in that first introduction that we might pass it along after Easter, but second and third thoughts incline me now to wait longer. After all, Craig was a seminarian when he thought his proposal through, and it suddenly seems fair to me that he be given the chance to see how it plays out in the

practicalities of today's parish life. So perhaps we'll write to him in a year or so—he took up his first call just this past month—and inquire how it's going; and should he be so inclined, what a gift it would be to hear him reflect on the contrast, if any, between the seminarian's vision and the pastor's discoveries. Then, I think, is when we'll pass along Part Four, if that's what we do.

For now, revel in the careful thinking that undergirds whatever else Craig had in mind when he wrote. Here for all of us is substance that we need to chew on over and over again—not once, not now and then, but daily, as Craig insists. Again, an apology for my abysmal failure to get my iMac email program to deliver endnotes in anything other than Roman numerals; and a second apology for waiting until now to send you Craig's bibliography, apart from which the endnotes can be opaque. Look for it at the end.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From ““Make us Die Every Day’: Baptism, Death, and Daily Prayer”
Craig F. Simenson
March, 2011

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Part 3. Baptized into the death and life of Christ

As already evidenced by the discussion thus far, I believe that the transformative and embodied vision of Christian baptism offers a helpful corrective lens to many of our misconceptions about the often sharply-drawn demarcation between life and death, and a way of rehearsing for our lives as they are lived in relationship to death. For one, baptismal language and its direct account of dying and rising runs us straight into the heart of our discomfort with death and our frequent inability to

express it. The sacrament of baptism is much more than figurative language, however. In so far as baptism is a celebrative act of worship involving our anointed foreheads (or entirely-immersed bodies), our voices lifted in song, the laying on of hands, a candle lit and shining for all to see, it also suggests the essential role that our bodily senses play in the life of Christian worship. Though Luther refused to deem these bodily signs alone as necessary to the efficacy of the sacrament—for him, baptism was ultimately established by the meeting of the divine promise and faith—he advocated for full-immersion baptism so that its full significance as “symbol” of death and resurrection be forcefully experienced and felt.[i]

Importantly, baptism serves as a key cord roped throughout the length of Christian life, tying together our birth into the body of the church and our inevitable deaths as bodies and souls commended into the hands of God. According to Luther and others, baptism is not an act that needs repeating. Rather, once pronounced over us—even for those fallen away from the faith of baptism—the truth of God’s promise remains ever steadfast, “always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.”[ii] Before drawing hard and fast lines between the faithful and the unfaithful (or between those inside the church and those outside of it), however, we should remember that no one is exempted from this situation of repentance, a situation that is in the end common to all of us who share these vulnerable and dying bodies. Applying Luther’s teaching of *simul iustus et peccator*, those of us who have been baptized can in no way speak triumphantly of our final baptism over and against others. For Luther, even those baptized “need continually to be baptized more and more, until we fulfill the sign perfectly at the last day.”[iii] In other words, even as baptism signifies our “full and complete justification,”[iv] we remain acknowledged sinners—simultaneously always falling away and

always being received again. As Matthew Myer Boulton comments, the Christian life which is fundamentally a baptismal life for Luther is consequently also an “itinerant life” of ongoing penance, a life unfolding before us like a “pilgrim’s path,” a life of “continually returning to faith in God’s baptismal promises.”[v] In the way of the ever-repenting traveler, we are only guided down the road to the final completion of our baptism through daily living and dying. To this point, Luther writes: “One thing only...has been enjoined upon us to do all the days of our lives—to be baptized, that is, to be put to death and to live again through faith in Christ.”[vi] Traditionally, then, the Lutheran church among others has understood the celebration of baptism as a lifelong gift, and, thereby, a gift with everyday implications for our lives.[vii] Churches in the U.S. seem to have largely failed, however, in conveying this sense that baptism is much more than a religious ceremony to mark a child’s birth—and that death is much more than merely an end-of-life event, but is rather a continual companion on the pilgrim’s path.

In the Christian funeral, the baptismal nature of the liturgy is traditionally marked from its opening, as the minister meets the dead and their family at the church entrance. After welcoming all the mourners now gathered into worship, the minister might offer words of thanksgiving for baptism, at the same time remembering the one who has died:

All who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. In baptism, Name was clothed with Christ. In the day of Christ’s coming, she/he shall be clothed with glory.[viii]

Well before this moment though, the baptismal pattern of death and life can be understood to shape the worship life of the church at every gathering. Church traditions in the U.S., such

as the ELCA, offer additional orders for the affirmation of baptism and for confession and forgiveness as ways in which churches, within the scope of their Sunday services, might recall baptism's continuing role in the formation of Christian bodies.[ix] Yet, in many Lutheran churches, the order for the affirmation of baptism might only be used once a year to mark the confirmation of "adult" church members. On the other hand, the order for confession and forgiveness often has a more regular—and pronounced—place in Sunday worship (especially among Lutherans where corporate confession and forgiveness regularly begins the service of Holy Communion every Sunday[x]). Still, only the most trained eyes and ears in a congregation are likely to catch the nearly indistinguishable (and seldom explicitly named) allusions that the words of confession and forgiveness make to our own baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ.[xi]

Ultimately, without strong enough liturgical cues or other forms of Christian education to draw our attention to the baptismal patterns present throughout our lives, Christians cannot fairly be expected to think of baptism as a lifelong journey completed only by death. Likewise, seldom is the church reminded that the Christian scriptures do not exclusively situate Jesus' own baptism along the banks of the Jordan. Rather, the New Testament also poignantly speaks of Christ's baptism as that baptism realized ultimately in his trial, crucifixion and bodily death (Mark 10.38-39, Luke 12.50, Romans 6.3-4). Frequently overlooked as well, John the Baptizer prefigures Jesus' later words to his disciples by warning us that there is still one coming who will baptize us "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3.11, Luke 3.16).[xii] Missing this means that we too narrowly understand the significance of our baptism into Christ, a baptism simultaneously already accomplished in our lives and yet still to be completed in the bodily death that inevitably awaits

us. In this light, I think Christians should also look again to Jesus' words to Nicodemus, when he tells his night visitor: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit, one cannot enter the dominion of God" (John 3.5). Significantly, Jesus goes on to suggest that this baptizing Spirit or Holy Wind blows wherever it wills, even while we do not know its coming or going[xiii]—thus, leaving wide open the possibilities of just how the Spirit will make its dwelling-place within our lives. Though we are sent out from the sacrament of baptism "not knowing where we go," called to "ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown," this Spirit of baptism remains present to all those born anew still listening for it.[xiv] Outside this dynamic intra-scriptural dialogue, we are likely to forget what baptism of the Spirit means for our life journeys towards the triune God who waits within death in order to bring life out of it. Consequently, we are also prone to underestimate the relevance of Christian baptism that continually and tangibly touches down on the rhythms of daily life—a life understood to be enlivened and transformed by its very proximity to death. Conversely, remembering baptism and cultivating awareness of the Spirit's presence in our lives, we too might proclaim Paul's bold witness to resurrection and the freedom given us through baptism when he says: "I die every day!" (1 Cor 15.31).

Living within death's reach

Putting death in the baptismal terms of everyday life does not deny that bodily death marks a dramatic and distinct transition in our lives. Rather, as embodied creatures, death undoubtedly changes the way we relate to those who have died and those still living. In the words of Long, all of creation is "bounded by mortality." [xv] Sometimes those bounds come as a gift, ending the unendurable pain and suffering of those we love. At other

times, however, death comes into our lives as the “last enemy” yet undefeated by God (1 Corinthians 15.26), a totally unexpected and destructive force that leaves us like Jesus grieving with “prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” that we or our loved ones might be spared death’s cruel reach (Hebrews 5.7). Even so, in the face of such darkness, Christ urges us by his own example to live into the will of God and never deny whatever might come into our lives (Matthew 26.38-46, Mark 14.32-42, Luke 22.40-53). As it does for everyone else, death will drape itself around us. Acknowledging such inevitabilities, it seems we must all bear our own crosses if we are to follow the Christ who carries his, buried with him by baptism into death so that we too might rise to live and serve the dominion of God (Matthew 10.38-39, Mark 8.34-35, Luke 14.27, John 12.24-26). In the promise of baptism, we are freed to give our selves—in our daily encounters with death—to the Spirit-led movement of life that extends well beyond us. Our ability to confront death in our everyday lives, to pick up and transform any death-wielding instrument used for violence or destruction in our world, has implications not only for how honestly we will prepare for our own deaths but also for how compassionately we will accompany others in theirs.

Denying our own death or the death of a beloved by averting our gaze puts us in danger of not looking up long enough to see the world as it is, or our proper place in it. Becker even relates the human bent towards narcissism—an absorption in the self that fills up the world to such a degree that there is little room for anything else—to a false immortality that we commonly imbue our daily routines with. Through such a distorted worldview, we are prone to live our lives as if we or those closest to us are somehow immune to death’s reach. In other words, we move through our days as if we will not die. As Becker points out, this not only leaves us ill-equipped to deal with the death that will

surely reach intimately into our own lives, but it also posits a false distance between “our world” and “the world out there,” i.e., the world of our neighbor. Instead, we are left only with a vague sense of pity for those who live and die outside of the bounds of our relevant worlds.[xvi] Counter to this, we as Christians are called to the love of God, neighbor, and self, a love that implies coming to terms with the truth that death naturally frames our shared existence as mortal beings formed from the earth, human and nonhuman alike.[xvii]

As a baptized people, the church must importantly realize that we are not waiting unprepared for death, denying it, or planning our escape. Rather, we can live into the hope that we have already begun rehearsing for death today. Before the time of Constantine’s imperial support for Christianity (with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD) and the rise of infant baptism, the *catechumenate* had developed among local churches as a process of teaching and faith formation for those preparing to be baptized into the community. The later development of *catechisms* around the time of Protestant Reformation in Europe in many ways picked up on the echoes of this earlier call to educate all those young in faith—even if already baptized at this point.[xviii] Today, whether one is baptized as an infant or preparing for baptism as an adult, Lathrop points out that the central “symbols”[xix] of what can generally be considered the western Christian catechism are really a collection of liturgical texts that function in baptism but continue to be used in worship as “tools for continual reinsertion in baptismal faith.”

the Ten Commandments;

the creed;

the Lord’s Prayer;

Baptism;

Holy Communion;

Keeping Luther in mind, Christian life itself might be defined as this “continual reinsertion in,” remembrance of and continual relearning of these baptismal symbols, especially as this liturgical “schooling” happens in the midst of people’s actual life circumstances.[xxi] Baptism calls all Christians to a kind of lifelong catechumenate of baptismal journeying in which we rehearse and embody our dead-but-raised selves, preparing both for the deaths we will die and for the lives we are living.

[i] Luther 1970: 190-191. Applicable to Luther’s use of the term here, Lathrop defines symbol generally as “a gathering place for communal encounter with larger meaning” or “a thing that enables participation in that to which it refers” (Lathrop 2006: 4). See also Lathrop 1993: 92 and 1999: 26-27.

[ii] Luther 1970: 180-181.

[iii] Ibid. 192.

[iv] Ibid. 190.

[v] Boulton 2008: 154.

[vi] Luther 1970: 193.

[vii] ELW 2006: 225, 275.

[viii] Based on Ibid. 280. In the chapter, “Planning the Funeral: Practical Matters,” Long relies primarily on the ELW and *The Order of Christian Funerals* (1989), the currently-approved Roman Catholic rite in the U.S., but supplements this material with an Eastern Orthodox rite and other Protestant variants. For discussion of the funeral’s

gathering, see Long 2009: 154-156.

[ix] ELW 2006: 225.

[x] For example, see the suggested order of Holy Communion in Ibid. 94-96.

[xi] As an example of the oft-obscure baptismal language characterizing orders of Confession and Forgiveness, see Ibid. 94-96.

[xii] But see also Mark 1.8, John 1.33. For other baptismal-like language linking death and fiery trial to the descent of the Spirit of God, see 1 Peter 4.12-14. Complementary to our earlier discussion of the church as temple of God, John's baptismal premonition of the coming Spirit and fire is also sometimes interpreted as pointing to the Spirit's descent upon and indwelling among the ekklesia community after Jesus' death (see Acts 2.1-4).

[xiii] The same Greek word, *pneuma*, means both "spirit" and "wind" (see John 3.8).

[xiv] Quoting the words of one of the prayers suggested by ELW for use during the liturgy of Morning Prayer (2006: 304).

[xv] Long 2009: 40.

[xvi] Becker 1973: 2.

[xvii] Genesis 2.7, 9, 19.

[xviii] See Bushkofsky and Satterlee 2008: 82.

[xix] See n. 84 above for Lathrop's definition of "symbol."

[xx] Lathrop 1999: 141.

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Unearthing Gospel Gold: Remarks on What It Is, and How to Find It

At the 2015 Crossings Seminar,
Shrine of our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois
by Jerome Burce, D.Min.

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There is gold; and then there's fool's gold. There is Gospel; and then there's faux gospel. I wish I could take credit for that phrase, faux gospel, but I can't. I stole it from my Crossing colleague, Marcus Felde, who, with several others, plans to spend tomorrow helping you, among other things, to refine and calibrate your faux gospel detectors so that you won't be taken in by rubbish and can bless the people in your lives with the real thing instead.

And isn't that exactly why you're here, not for your own sake, but for the sake of the people God has filled your lives with to overflowing? Some of you call some of them parishioners; or you call them fellow members of the church I go to. Or you call them children, or friends, or co-workers, or neighbors. Or you call them the lady behind the counter at the corner store, or the kid who mows my lawn.

And let's by no means forget the ones you refer to as passersby, or strangers. That includes the jerk who cut you off on the freeway the other day, and the aromatic fellow who shook a tattered paper cup at you when you got downtown. "You crazy dirt bag"—that's the thought, or something like it, that tripped across your mind when he did it. Being raised as you were, you kept your mouth shut and didn't say it, of course; but being born as you were, you sure enough did think it, and with the thought came a little flush of satisfaction, perhaps, that you, for one, were honest enough to admit that you were thinking it; and really why shouldn't you think it, what's the point in being less than blunt about these not so pleasant human specimens that all of us can't help but stumble over as we pick our daily paths through this broken, sinful world.

Add to this the thought that God the Holy Spirit might well

appreciate this bluntness. Why shouldn't he, I ask. After all, it relieves him of the hassle of having to slice through a hide of false piety, than which few hides are more resistant to the two-edged sword the Spirit wields. That hide lies thickest on the baptized likes of us. We went to Sunday School. We've sat in church. We know the Lord's command to love your neighbor as yourself. We're well beyond the common folly that hears this as nothing more than a lovely sentiment, to be taken or left according to each one's discretion. No, we say. When the Lord says "love," the Lord means "love," and since loving that shaker of the tattered cup is not compatible with calling him a dirt bag, therefore I dare not, therefore I will not, therefore I do not; and if any should suggest that I so much as entertain such thoughts, I'll deny it to their faces. What a pain this must be for the Spirit, Holy and Righteous, as he reads the wrinkled nose, the slight flinch of the hand as I extend it toward the cup with a quarter or two, no more than that, I cannot know if the fellow will use it to buy another binge on Thunderbird or whatever other rotgut stuff the down-and-out are using to get drunk on these days. Far be it from me to abet his happiness in depravity.

"Gotcha," says the Spirit, who tells us also not to judge lest we be judged—yet judging is what we do. We do it because we've got to do it, we cannot help but do it; reaching conclusions about the other, be these studied or snap, is as intrinsic to life in this world as breathing, or the steady pounding of a heart. All of you are doing it with me, right now, as I stand here talking, and you can rest assured that I'll return the favor later when I'm listening to you, in whatever venue that listening should happen. And for me there's again that glint of pleasure, the little thrill of satisfaction, in observing this; in taking the risk with all of you of pointing it out.

"You crazy dirt bag," says the Spirit, as he catches my

thoughts—yours too, perhaps; though being the Spirit, he tends as a rule to say this more elegantly. For example, “all flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flowers of the field,” etc. I mention this parenthetically for now, with the further observation, also in parentheses, that while human flesh glories in much, there is nothing it glories in more than its god-like status as a knower of good and evil. Behold the toddler asserting her right to decide whether Mommy, in pressing her to eat her carrots, is talking sense or spouting drivel; and if Mommy thinks the carrot fight is tough, wait till the tattoo question comes screaming through the door in a decade or so. In that day watch Mommy scratch her head in bewilderment as she wonders how somebody *she* formed, shaped, and raised could ever think to want a tattoo. Or to put this more precisely, what she wonders is how this child of hers could insist on finding worth where there is no worth, attaching value to something that serves in fact to devalue, as Dear Daughter, if she gets her way, is bound to discover in a few years time when she’s out there trying to land the first real job, the one with semi-decent pay and benefits. Not that Mom gets anywhere by pointing this out now, not when Daughter glories so stubbornly in the divine right of the newly minted teen to know so very much better than her elders ever have, or ever will.

Parenting, I sometimes think, was designed by God in part to force the bilious taste of his own consternation down our stubborn, willful throats. He formed us. He shaped us. He calls us his own. And not a day goes by when he doesn’t catch each of us reveling in rubbish and turning up our snotty noses at things that he holds precious and dear.

And yes, this is true of us all. Again the episode we started with: two baptized sons of God Most High, gone down to the city to go about their business, are accosted by a beggar. The one is pious, the other is not. The one drops coins, the other brushes

by. The one prays, "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other so-called Christians. I stop. I drop. I love my neighbor—I do, I do." And the other: "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other so-called Christians, so silly in their piety, so self-deluded. I know my faults, my limits. I tell it like it is, with eyes wide open."

And in so praying—I'm speaking here of fleeting prayer, the kind that skitters through the mind, all but unnoticed, though always caught by the One who catches every thought—in that praying, each man has an admiring eye on something inside him, something about him, that rivets his attention. Really, it isn't much—a speck of something, nothing more; but even so it glints. It gleams. It makes him happy. Spotting it, he feels the glow of a certain worth that other people lack.

Ah, the glow. Some of you drink whiskey; some do not. Those who do are familiar with the glow that not only warms, it addles the wits. This is that kind of glow. Before you know it, two people who have waded in the Word of God their whole lives long are being swept away in the primordial madness that expects Almighty God, Holy and Righteous, to take his cues from sinners. So as I sneak a second glance at the glint that caught my eye, I expect God's eye to follow mine, and catch it too—that much it surely does, it always does. But more, I also expect that God will see the thing as I see it and name it as I name it; and in the name that I use to describe it—a spark of loving intention, if I'm the pietist, a flash of gruff courageous honesty, if I'm the other guy—in that name you'll hear everything you need to know about my own assessment of what I've found. It's a fleck—a grain or two, if nothing more—of glorious gold. God's kind of gold. We often call that gold by its other name: righteousness.

God likes this gold, of course. God seems in fact to have an insatiable thirst for it. He certainly demands it. Open to most

any page in the Bible and you'll find him saying so. Listen to any preacher today who takes the Bible seriously and they'll say it too, as indeed they should—shame on them if they don't. Can you blame me, then, for being thrilled to have found this speck of it inside me, and after that for being eager that God should see it too?

“Not so fast,” says the Lord, using tones the mother mimics as she weighs in on the merits of the teen's tattoo. And again the Lord says, here leaning on his poet: “All that glitters is not gold.” After that the punch line, doing double duty as a punch in the gut—God's own words now: “Dust you are, and only dust, returning to dust: and to think you dared to think this little fleck of shiny whatever intermingled with the dust-you-are would somehow impress me,” says the Lord. “And you called him a crazy dirt bag?”

Really, what else is the Lord to say in this moment of our scenario as he watches a pair of his baptized agents refusing to extend anything approaching genuine love to their neighbor, the smelly beggar—will either try to engage the creature in any kind of conversation, let alone the kind that acknowledges him as a fellow human being, are you kidding?—and still they find a way to preen as they walk away from their encounter with him.

Have they forgotten what they heard as recently as Christmas Eve, that God has a surprising fondness for uncouth, dirty, hopeless and going-absolutely-nowhere specimens of human garbage that nobody else can find the faintest scrap of value in? Seriously, one reason shepherds abided in the field is that city-dwellers couldn't abide them. But it's these to whom the angel comes, and of all the dead to be raised to life by the Word of God in the angel's mouth, they are the first. “Fear not. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

So tell me, who's worth what in that encounter on our downtown city street?

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Time to pause and get our bearings.

What you've heard from me so far is an example of the kind of analysis that Cathy Lessmann is going to walk you through at length tomorrow morning—not the whole analysis in this example so far, but only the first part. I'll leave Part Two for discussion later, if we get to it. For now I want to take you behind the curtain for a peek at the machinery, the set of fundamental assumptions that are driving the rest of what's spilling out of me tonight, and will gush from Cathy tomorrow.

I should mention, by the way, that Cathy's work with you will focus squarely on Scriptural texts, and how to read them. I've been zeroed in so far on reading a real-life situation, with bits and pieces of Scripture dancing in the background and egging me on. In doing that, I've put the cart ahead of the horse—do pardon the cliché, the third, I think, in about as many sentences—and that's the chief reason for hitting the pause button (cliché #4) to examine why I'm thinking the way I am, and why I'm urging you to think that way too; and if it strikes you that my urging is intense tonight, wait till Cathy gets hold of you tomorrow—Cathy whose calling is not to preach, but to listen to preachers, which, over a lifetime, is also to suffer from preachers, too many of whom fail to deliver what Cathy will tell you she absolutely needs them to deliver, at least one nugget per sermon of pure Gospel gold.

Faux Gospel doesn't cut it. Faux Gospel at its best can be very attractive and full of yellow sparkle, but really, for all its prettiness, it's nothing more than a lump of iron that weighs you down and leaves you dead broke.

So my first and major task with you tonight is to define terms. Above all, what is Gospel, and what is not? I'm going to spend almost all my remaining time with you tonight on this, and we will dig deeply.

At the end, as a postscript of sorts, I'm going to pass along a couple of essential tools for reading the Bible. These come from Lutheran confessors of the 16th century, who realized that century upon century of shabby reading and poor interpretation had obscured the rich veins of Gospel God has put there for the benefit of dead broke sinners. So the first tool is a pickax of sorts, designed to break the gold loose from the material that surrounds it. The second is a touchstone, the tool one uses to test for the real thing—genuine Gospel as opposed to the faux versions that are still seducing eyes and hearts today.

So that's the outline for the next several minutes. Let's get to it, starting with that key word, "Gospel."

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Gospel means "good news." You all know that. I wish there was a handy synonym for this, but there isn't, and that's too bad. In today's English the word "Gospel" is opaque, and the phrase "good news" has gotten limp and weak through overuse. An imaginary newsflash of the sort we hear every day on the radio: "The Bureau for Consumer Awareness announced today that the cost of hamburger will increase next week to \$8 a pound, but the good news is that gas prices continue to slide." Really, good news? Ho hum at best, I should think, and not good at all if I'm a serious fan of red meat.

I sometimes wonder if these everyday speech habits haven't set us up to settle also in church for good news that really isn't, and for gospel, little "g", that's as faux as faux can be. St. Paul would call these "other gospels"—not, he says, that there

is another gospel, or in Paul's first century people's Greek, another *euaggelion*. That's something good (*eu-*) delivered by an *angel*, a messenger. A good message, you might say. Or sharper still, a good announcement.

I assume the first century world, like ours, was awash in *euaggelia*, people popping up in the town square week by week to announce that the legions had clobbered the Parthians again in the latest kerfuffle out east, or that our own Pythias, the prefect's son, had just won third place in the discus throw at the all-Macedonia tryouts for next year's Olympic Games

Paul, by contrast, is extraordinarily stingy with *euaggelion* as a word. To know the story of his conversion—some of us heard it again in church this morning—is to understand why. There he is, face down in the dust of the Damascus highway, squirming as the shepherds squirmed in the dirt of their Bethlehem fields, only now it's not an angel talking, it's the risen Christ, the one who sits at God's right hand as the Ultimate Judge, beyond whom there is absolutely no appeal, not even to the Father. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And again, "I am Jesus," *ego eimi Iesous*, where *ego eimi*, "I am," is the God-name that Moses learned about at the burning bush, as Saul of Tarsus knows only too well. So he squirms again. What else can he do as he waits for the lightning bolt to split his spine wide open from neck to tail bone?

Only then the words—two words, I think, sometimes three in English—that must have stuck forever after in Paul's memory and been for him the touchstone of what is *euaggelion*, and what is not. Here's what Saul heard: "But get up." Greek has two words for the conjunction "but," a little but, *de*, and a big but, *alla*. This is the big but, the huge but, the great "*alla*" hinge on which the door to an unthinkably impossible future suddenly swings open. The voice of Christ: "Don't lie there as the

worthless dirt bag you are and the mangled corpse you ought to be. *But* get up.” Arise, if you will. “And getting up, start taking those first toddling steps into a new life, a sudden and astonishing existence of inexpressibly high quality and value, a golden Easter life, impervious to rust and rot and corruption and death, and it’s yours as sheer gift. Not a speck of it have you earned. To the contrary. All you’ve managed to do is to dis-earn it. But, even so, get up. Get going. Enjoy your golden life and give it a righteous whirl. And that’s exactly what Paul will do. God’s word insists that he’s still doing it.

Later on Paul will famously feature this great “*alla*” hinge in his letter to the Romans, 3:21: “*But* now, aside from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, the kind that makes its startling appearance through faith in Christ Jesus.” We’ll talk soon about how St. Mark in particular depicts this appearance. My point for the moment is simply that, where Paul is concerned, nothing short of a word this huge and magnificent can qualify for the term *euaggelion*. “Good news” doesn’t cut it anymore as an adequate English equivalent. Nor does plain old “gospel,” for that matter. So I propose—not that anyone anywhere will bother to listen—that we whose business it is to pass God’s *euaggelion* along to other English speakers today might do well to inflate our terminology the way you’ve heard me do it once so far this evening. Cathy doesn’t go to church on Sunday to hear “the Gospel”. She goes instead for that weekly nugget of pure Gospel gold. Let’s say it like that. Let’s make ourselves remember that she goes there for nothing less than the inexpressible gift of God that turns dirt bags into golden children. And so do you.

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Enter then the concept of golden children. Another term for these is “saints.” Paul uses this term in all but one of the

letters he writes to churches. The exception is his letter to the Galatians. This shouldn't surprise us. Nor should the tone that also sets the letter apart, both angry and anguished. The Galatians, after all, are trading in their Gospel gold for glitzy iron junk, a stupid move that succeeding waves of Christians have kept making in all the centuries since. I wish I could find a way to keep people in the congregation I serve, teenagers in particular, from drifting off to places that peddle this rubbish as a matter of course. If any of you have some clues about this, tell me later.

I need to say some more about this junk so we all understand what I'm talking about. Most of you, I'm sure, are guessing already, and guessing quite rightly.

The junk is the value that human beings, addicted from birth to notions of self-worth, are driven endlessly to accumulate for themselves. They measure that value in countless ways. Money is a biggie, of course. So is beauty, fame, and fitness. So is prowess—athletic, academic, entrepreneurial, the list goes on. I think power is the most important thing we use to measure value by. That's in part because the person or party with power is able to jiggle the scales that measure what value is. They're also able to act in ways that either increase or decrease the value of others, as, for example, when Hitler sends his Wehrmacht into Poland, or when a boss promotes one employee and fires another.

In passing, when a person has built up value in whatever specie to an amount that *she* finds satisfying, she'll say of herself, "I'm all right." "All right" is the street English way of saying "righteous." God is never impressed when he hears people carrying on about their self-certified all-rightness. In fact he makes it a point to prove them all wrong, as the wealthy farmer found out in the parable Jesus told. "You fool," God says (Luke

12:20), and this of course is the same God who takes to laughing when the kings of the earth start strutting their stuff (Psalm 2:4).

Yet here's where it gets interesting in a painful sort way, so painful that even theologians—lots of them—refuse to face it. It's against these teachers, by the way, that Paul is squaring off in Galatians. Martin Luther will do the same in his day with the likes of Johannes Eck, and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Between them sits Augustine, contesting with Pelagius.

The point of painful interest is that God who mocks the value we accumulate has all along been pushing us to go for it. What's more, he's given us the structures we use to define value, and the mechanisms that build it up. The rich farmer is rich only because God has made his fields productive. The kings strut because God has filled their little fiefdoms with the wherewithal to pay an army. The mother crowing on Facebook about her righteous children is crowing only because she's been busy doing what God requires all mothers to do, caring for her children, and loving them, and helping them to grow and prosper into Facebook-worthy children. To do such things is the law of motherhood, inscribed on every mother's heart, whether they want it there or not. Most do. Most take it simply for granted. The same is true for most every other person when it comes to the laws appropriate to them in their particular vocations, the worker that he should work, the employer that he should pay the worker, the student that she should study and get her papers done on time, said time defined by a professor who's busy obeying the law of professors to draw the best they can from their students in a timely fashion.

Beneath these laws lurk other laws, the general ones—ten by one reckoning, and by another two: love God; love your neighbor. That said, don't give your heart to lesser powers, don't do the

core things that hurt your neighbor. All this too is etched in every human mind and heart, so deeply and thoroughly that I've never understood why we need to have fights about whether to post the Ten Commandments on courthouse lawns. Why bother? Show me the thief who, in your opinion, doesn't already know how wrong it is to steal. I'll prove otherwise. I'll prove it by stealing something from him. And when he yelps—or swings for my head, as the case may be—in that moment we'll see again how the law against stealing is, like all those other laws, embedded in the very operation of the world as we know it. It's not for nothing that the prophets call on us to name and honor it as the word of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. Not a golden word, but a word of iron, hard, tough, rigid, inescapable, designed expressly for the children of Adam and Eve who, from God's perspective, are anything but golden. "There is no one who is righteous, no not one." That's Paul, quoting Psalm 14 in his final descent to the great hinge moment of Romans 3. Riffing on that thought we might once again observe how every human being is born to be a thief, and the gold they have their fingers on is God's gold, known otherwise, again, as God's righteousness, a quality—a privilege—that begins and ends with God's right to say what's right and what is not right. But the moment we touch that gold it turns to poisonous lead. "Their eyes were opened," as it says, "and they saw that they were naked." At which point, looking down, he asserted his right to admire what he saw, and then he heard her snicker because she, asserting her right, was finding him ridiculous. Later the toddler will kick about the carrots, and the silly girl will sneak away one night to get the tattoo, and as in the garden, so now in the house, so also in the whole wide world, there is misery, and there is wrath. That's what happens when sinners grab for golden rights that don't belong to them.

Iron is God's first response to this mess. Let's not despise

iron. It isn't pretty, but it has its uses. From it you can build the structures that control the thieving multitudes and keep them from the instant ruin they'd come to otherwise. You can also fashion the instruments that restrict and punish when the thieving gets out of hand. Iron, God's iron, is the element that fortifies the agreements sinners reach about what is right and wrong for everybody. Without such agreements—cultural, legal, political—we wouldn't cooperate, and we simply couldn't live. Sinai is the story of God himself devising an iron-clad agreement—a covenant, as we like to say—to shape and govern life for a particular set of thieving sinners; though in the preamble to that he clarifies the iron principles—again, those Ten Commandments—that govern life for every group of thieving sinners. And when they flout these principles, back comes the iron, God's iron, this time as the essential component of things like swords and pistols and police cruisers, and the razor wire that surrounds the prison yard.

Here's the one thing God's iron doesn't do. It doesn't change the sinner. It doesn't drive the thieving impulse from my heart. It doesn't kill my urge to grab the gold—God's right to say what's right—and to claim this as my own. If anything it exacerbates it. That's the point that Paul, Augustine, and Luther, each in their own time, are wrangling over with their opponents. The idea has ever been, and still is today, that if I do what God says is right, then—guess what—I'll have the right to insist that God admit this. Again, "I thank thee, Lord, that I'm not like other men. See? See? Such pretty speckles your iron law has produced in me. Aren't you happy? And if you aren't, what's wrong with you?" Of course this is ludicrous. It's the student checking in at the professor's office to demand an A+ on that altogether righteous paper that he, the student, just knows that he has written. If I'm the prof I think I respond to the fellow's cheek by cutting his grade from B to C-, and then I

send him packing.

Or if I'm Jesus, I tell the fellow to go sell everything he has and give it to the poor—to divest himself, that is, of all his worth, his own worth—and then come follow me. Maybe then, and only then, you'll get somewhere.

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Quickly, one final point or maybe two to tidy things up so far, and then, yes, we'll get to the good stuff; the really, really good stuff; the Gospel gold.

So first, let's look again at this matter that even theologians bridle at. It drives them crazy. They do their best to dance around it. The consequence of that is the gush of faux gospel that continues to this day to flood the church.

Most all of you, I think, are familiar with Isaiah 6, or at least the first part of it, where the prophet recounts how he was called. It ends with his stirring declaration, the key text for all too many ordination and commissioning sermons. "Here I am. Send me." Here endeth the lesson, says the preacher, only the lesson doesn't end there. Now the prophet lays out what he's being sent to do, and it isn't nice. 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes...lest they turn and be healed.'" In other words, go, aggravate their sin, their core, essential sin, and make it worse.

Jesus echoes this in Mark 4, when he explains why he speaks in parables. Paul operates with the same idea in the opening section of 1st Corinthians, where he talks about God working deliberately to make smart people stupid.

Back in Exodus God hardens Pharaoh's heart. He makes him stubborn so God can flash God's glory as he pries his people out of slavery, at horrendous cost to the Egyptians.

I'm hard pressed to think of a single red-blooded American who would agree at the deep-down gut level that God has a right to operate this way. It doesn't sound good. It doesn't sound godly. I can hear it now, and so can you: "I can't and won't believe in a god who would carry on like this." Do golden children talk like this about their God? Not a chance.

And with that the truth is out in the open, exactly where God wants it, for all to see—or it would be if those theologians, those teachers of preachers, weren't stepping in to defend God's honor, as I suppose they see it.

So they teach that God can't really mean what God says, and they teach that God would never be so cruel as to hand down a law we couldn't obey, and then they lay their hands on Jesus and turn him from Savior and Christ into something like a super coach who helps us do what's right. Along the way they dumb down his death into little more than a demonstration of how much God loves us, and if God so loves, then surely we can suck it up and do some loving too, first of God, and then the neighbor, and after a while the Almighty will see enough that glitters in our lives to order up a pair of golden slippers, our very own. I'm being facetious, of course, and grossly superficial. There isn't time to dig deeper, though if I did, it would only get worse.

It was worse in Galatia, where people were being told that you couldn't get to Jesus without signing on to Sinai first, not some of Sinai, but all of Sinai, circumcision included.

It was worse in the Latin Church of the dying Roman empire, where thieving sinners were being told that they were intrinsically good, and could be better if only they would try a

wee bit harder.

It was worse in the late medieval papal church, where people were being told that if they were short on personal sparkle, they could buy some, through the church, from the treasure house of extra sparkle that all the really, really good people had generated in the course of their really good lives.

It is worse in the American church, where preachers on both sides of the blue/red divide will skip quickly past the crucified Jesus thing, not knowing quite what to do with it, I suppose, and will focus instead on self-help lectures, or on exhortations to save the unborn or defend the immigrant, not that such things aren't important, but for sure they aren't Gospel. They do nothing to rescue thieves from their addiction to glitter, and they don't shield worthless, deluded wretches from the wrath of a righteous God.

Speaking of which, does it startle some of you to hear me talking this way? That wouldn't surprise me. You don't hear "wrath of God" talk in American churches anymore, not even in Lutheran churches. That's why we're drowning, as people did in those prior centuries, in a tidal wave of gospel so-called. Good news that really isn't. Faux gospel. No one has the nerve to take the golden righteousness of God with the seriousness it requires. If they did might think for once to knock it off with their idle prattle and scout around for a person who's big enough to handle God for them.

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Now if you're looking for that person there's no better place to start than with St. Mark's account of the Gospel. As it happens, we'll be hearing from Mark on Sundays for much of the current church year. We got our first dose of him on the Second Sunday in Advent.

Here's how he started: The beginning of the *euaggelion* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This drives immediately into a quotation from Malachi, where God promises to send someone to clean up the worthless mess that masquerades as righteousness in the Jerusalem temple. Isn't that the very issue we've just been talking about? A lack of value? Fool's gold passing for the real thing? For which God's answer is this Jesus, this Christ, this Son of God.

Colloquial English has a splendid synonym for "Son of God." I've used it already, though in the plural, not the singular. How about this as a translation of Mark 1:1— "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, *the Golden Child*." As we'll hear God say a mere eleven verses in, at the baptism, and in chapter 9 at the transfiguration, this is my Son, the Beloved, which is to say, the One I'm Really Stuck On. To which he adds, at the Baptism, "with you I am well pleased," or you could say, "on you I dote." And at the transfiguration he adds, "listen to him!" Not to Moses. Not to Elijah. God help us, don't listen to the voices inside your own head, chattering away about how valuable you are. No, listen to him!"

Actions, as they say, speak louder than words, so let's listen for a little bit as the Golden Child swings into action. Notice first his fascination for wretches that you and I in our arrogance would brush aside as total dirt bags—no flecks, no specks, no glitter, no worth at all. Two of these bookend his pre-Jerusalem ministry, a raving nutcase in the Capernaum synagogue to get things rolling, and a pushy, obnoxious blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho as he wraps things up. When Jesus is done with them, both stand there looking and sounding like God's golden children ought to look and sound. For his part the beggar is tagging after Jesus as an example to everybody, disciples in particular, of what it means to follow him.

Between these episodes are similar ones, far more than we recount here. The leper at the end of chapter 1. The paralytic lowered down through the roof, chapter 2. The man with the withered hand, chapter 3. The foreigner infested with an army of demons, the bleeding woman, the dead girl, all in chapter 5. The crazy foreign lady's crazy daughter and the babbling deaf guy, chapter 7. Another blind guy, chapter 8. Another crazy kid, chapter 9. Every one of these people come away from their encounter with Jesus having been saved. That Mark's term for it, though translators often muddy this with alternatives, like "made well." I wish they'd quit doing that. "Made well" doesn't say nearly enough about what's just happened. Each of these people has been plucked up, in one way or another, from worthlessness— from being stuck in a corner to die because no one else can find the slightest speck of value in them; or in the case of Jairus's daughter, saved from being buried in the grave that all dust bags are headed for. *But* when Jesus is done with them— notice, not a little "but" here, a big *alla* "but"—BUT when Jesus is done with them, they positively drip with value, each and every one.

And here's an interesting detail, accentuated by Mark if not altogether peculiar to him. In case after case, Jesus' interaction with these people, these dirt bag people, includes not only words, but also touch. Let's think about that for a moment from two angles. First, would either of our two Christian friends, gone to the city to go about their business, consider touching that fellow who's shaking the cup at them? I don't think so. Yet that's what Jesus does, the Christ, the Golden Child.

Second. You've all heard of the Midas touch. So here, Mark says, is the Jesus' touch—a very different thing, of course. The Midas touch kills, the Jesus touch makes alive. In both cases it's a golden touch, but then there's old gold, and there's new gold,

the kind that befits a new creation, and new gold is that quality that makes the righteous Father's eyes start dancing with joy. That's what floods a dirt bag when the Golden Child touches her. *I* become a golden child when Jesus touches me.

Now that, I submit, is pure Gospel gold—a gift to celebrate, capital “C” and then to put to serious use. I think it's time to quit dumbing down the Eucharist into a happy pseudo-meal that we all share as an expression of our mutual commitment to hospitality or whatever else it is that's being touted today. Something far more profound is going on this, the Lord's Supper. Here the Golden Child swings into action. So he touches me, he touches you, he touches the spouse who divorced me three years ago, and the bitterness lingers; he touches the fellow on the other side of the aisle, seven pews back, whose attitude I do not like. As he does this his word and Spirit pushes us to imagine and trust what God is seeing, how these flecky, specky people, dirt bags all, are being renewed before his eyes as his own golden children— pure gold, not fool's gold. Now there's a thought and a faith to take with you into the next Council meeting.

One other comment about the supper: the Eucharist is *not* for everybody, because not everybody wants Jesus touching them. This too is a key point in Mark's telling of the *euagglion*, and it leads into other key points. Some people keep their distance from Jesus, some walk away from him, some flat out oppose him. They see nothing of the Golden Child in this clown from Nazareth. Instead they see a thieving sinner—an egregious one at that. They see someone who keeps fingering God's gold, the rights that belong to God and no one else: the right to forgive sins, for example (Chapter 2) or to re-write Sabbath rules (chapter 3), and in the end when Jesus comes waltzing into the temple with whip in hand as if he owned the place, they make up their minds that this fellow, so obscenely full of himself, so

obnoxious in his delusions of worth and place and grandeur, has simply got to go. So they set out in the name of God to strip him of his worth, whatever that may be, and now we find ourselves in St. Mark's passion, which, of the four, is easily the darkest. Bit by bit every speck and sparkle of value that we know as human creatures is stripped from Jesus: first liberty, then friends, then audience—those crowds that flocked to him the prior Sunday—then clothes, then skin and blood, and finally his life; and in the moment of his dying we hear him screaming at a black and empty sky, from which the Father's voice is missing—even God has turned away.

What Mark shows us in this account is the reduction of Jesus from Golden Child to Total Dirt bag—dust he has been, and to dust he now returns—only then the utter astonishment of Easter, in Mark the strange Easter that nobody talks about because they're just too scared. Whoever would believe that a righteous God with any sense of dignity at all would raise so worthless a creature from the dead.

Saul turned Paul will believe it later, though only when the Golden Child accosts him; and after that no one will do better in describing what happened in the story that Mark relates. "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"—and no, not by earning it, but simply by trusting it.

Now is that Gospel gold, or what? Paul thinks so highly of it that he counts all else as loss and rubbish for the "surpassing value" of owning it (Philippians 3:7-9). Through him God invites the rest of us to do the same.

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So tomorrow all of us are going to practice digging for this stuff—this glorious enriching stuff—first in the pages of Holy

Scripture, and then in the content of the lives we lead today as baptized human beings.

We're going to do that because Christ through his Spirit has strangely picked us to deliver the goods, some formally from a pulpit or a platform, as the case may be, and all of us, bar none, as we go about our days in a world where iron rules.

I mention ever so quickly that Christ has always made strange choices when it comes to his agents. This too is one of the main themes in Mark, even the central theme, perhaps; how Jesus picks dirt bags to follow him and after that is at enormous pains to get them understanding who he is and what he's doing. Now they see this Golden Child thing, but mostly they don't; and what they never get is why the Golden Child (if that's who he is) is on his way to Dirt Bag Central, known otherwise as Golgotha. In the end they simply scatter into the night, Peter bawling as he goes, and they're back to the standard nonsense of trying to use an iron law to conjure some up some genuine worth for themselves. Like God will be impressed.

I'm all but certain that Mark wants us to see those disciples as a metaphor for the post-Easter baptized Christian, or in other words, for us.

He also wants us to understand that the Christ who refused to give up on them, is by no means ready to give up on us; and with the kind of patience that only a Golden Child would possess, he'll keep working, working, working, to get us to get it.

After that it's our turn to go apostolic on him. Our time together here is designed to help us do that well. God grant it. The world needs it. The church needs it, for that matter. It always has. It always will.

As we get ready for tomorrow's digging, there are two things I

want to underscore with you and then I'm done. Both of these come to us as gifts from Luther and his colleagues who stumbled onto them in the course of their own great assault on the rubbish of faux gospel and fool's gold.

The first of these is the essential, critical insight that the Scriptures are not composed of one, uniform metal as people commonly assume. You know, it's the Bible, the Word of God, and all words of God are equal. So for devotions in the morning you can simply flip the Bible open, put your finger on a verse, then read it, believe it, and do it; after which, as Spock says, you will live long and prosper.

Are you kidding? Nothing you will lead you to fool's gold faster than that.

Instead, say our forebears, remember that you're dealing in the Bible with two substances. One is iron. The other is gold. One controls thieves. The other creates genuine value. One weighs you down. The other cuts you loose. One goads you into trying to make something of yourself. The other shows you that God in Christ has made everything of you already, and is bound and determined to keep you that way.

Here's one of the important differences between these words. The iron separates. The gold unites. The iron forces us to notice differences between rich and poor, smart and silly, black and white, person going somewhere and person going nowhere, and then to treat these differences as things that matter to God as well. The iron tricks a baptized person who should know better into thinking that he is better and worth more, also in God's eyes, than the hopeless fellow with the tattered cup. By contrast, the gold draws us into the joy of finding equal value in each other, the high and holy worth of Christ. Not so long ago it moved a pope to kiss a beggar, to the astonishment of the world.

And a last big difference: the iron word is finally designed to mock sinners, to expose their thievery, and then to kill them. The golden word is finally designed to fill the age to come with golden children, all of whom, for now, are shining in the midst of a corrupt and perverse generation like stars in the world. That's Paul again, Philippians 2:15 (NRSV).

Both these words, the iron and the golden, are tremendously important. Both have their uses in the work God is doing in somebody like me. But they have got to be distinguished. If they aren't, the iron wins out, and the end result is either people preening over glitter, or people in despair that they are only dirt and dust, and with no hope of being more than that.

Next and final point: how do you spot the gold as you pore through the Scriptures, or listen to a sermon, or sit through a conversation between fellow Christians for that matter? The best advice for that comes from Luther's colleague, Phillip Melanchthon, in the fourth article of his defense of the Augsburg Confession, commonly known as the Apology.

Tip #1: listen for the sound of promise. Gospel gold is always promising. It tells always and only of things God has done, is doing, or will do, the outcome of which for us is good, and only good. A recent theologian put it this way: you'll know it's Gospel if God is running the verbs, with you as the beneficiary. For example, "I will put a new heart within you," Jeremiah 31.

Tip #2: apply a test. The teacher who put me and others onto this long ago called it the Double Dipstick test. Tonight I'm going to call it the double dirt bag test, small d, big D. First the small "d" test: Gospel gold is gospel gold when it eases the pain of someone who calls herself a dirt bag; when it invites her to believe in her worth—her real and genuine worth—in the sight of a righteous God. Melanchthon called this "comforting a

troubled conscience.”

Next, the big “D” test: Gospel gold is gospel gold when the one who gets the credit for it is the big “D” Dirt-bag-for-us, namely Jesus on the cross, stripped of his worth, and filling us with value. You know it’s Gospel, said Melancthon, when Christ gets the glory. But the moment you’re claiming credit for yourself—and credit— you’re back to fiddling with fool’s gold.

+ + +

With that I’m done, because the clock says I’m done, though what it really says is that I’m overdone. There is much, much more that I’ve thought to say, much, much more that I need to say, but the iron law of clocks forbids it—and I will count on you as God’s golden children to forgive me for leaving it unsaid.

Tomorrow is another day. God guide and bless the work we do together when the morning comes.

[Unearthing Gospel Gold \(PDF\)](#)

Death, Life, and Baptism (2)

Colleagues,

Last week Craig Simenson critiqued American funeral practices, Christian ones included, for their failure to take bodies with the seriousness that bodies deserve, even when they’re dead. Today he starts challenging us to do better than that. See below for his cogent argument

A little more about Craig: raised in Wisconsin, he majored in

Political Science and Social Work at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Then he headed for Boston, where he landed a good job with a non-profit service organization. A few years into that, he started sensing some inexplicable tugs toward theology and ministry. At some point he yielded, and landed a berth at Harvard Divinity School. Once there, he found to his own great surprise that he was being drawn to reexamine the roots of the Lutheran childhood that he had stepped away from along the way. The key mentor who encouraged and guided that reexamination was a Calvinist. Go figure. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The older I get, the more I grow in my appreciation of this, our Lord's own observation (John 3:8).

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From **"'Make us Die Every Day': Baptism, Death, and Daily Prayer"**

Craig F. Simenson

March, 2011

Part 2. To be temples of God: life and death embodied

In truth, recent funeral trends merely reinforce a kind of modern liturgical apathy within many mainline U.S. churches that fail to invite us into a more participatory liturgical experience with direct relevance to our everyday lives.[i] Rarely, whether in funerals or other liturgical contexts, are we actually challenged to be "temples of God," i.e., to worship as wholly-embodied beings, encouraged to hear, see and touch a God claimed to be among us. In the last decades, much western theology has brought greater attention to the important role of the body in Christian worship, often looking back to some of the most ancient Christian liturgies, but critical liturgical reform among national church bodies and many

local congregations still generally lags behind such scholarship. Worship leaders perhaps play the most decisive role in trying out new-old forms that might give a more pronounced role to the body in the ritual journey – weekly played out in Sunday services – of a people baptized into the death and life of Christ. In so far as we are all participants in such liturgy, however, we will all be better prepared for truly transformative worship with a more expansive and integrative sense of religious education in our churches, “schooling” that must be as practical as it is informative—teaching that, alongside the work of the religious ed classroom, must also fundamentally include our rehearsal of the roles and parts to be played in this baptismal pilgrimage from death to life. As a matter of definition, this “rehearsal” should not be understood as mere impersonation, but rather the whole-hearted and fully-embodied “imitation” of Christ into whom we are baptized.[iii]

Our baptism means that we have all been empowered to play invaluable roles in a “priesthood” shared and shaped by all believers. At the same time, it also means that the call towards liturgical renewal – even if it begins with only a little yeast leavening the loaf (Mt 13.33; Lk 13.21) – always includes the participation of the entire congregation communing together as an integrated body, both worship leaders and religious educators, clergy and laity, children and adults. While Part IV will later focus our attention rather narrowly on moving step-by-step through the order of daily prayer, I believe that the renewal of our prayer and worship life towards a more baptismal view of death will require this fully integrative pedagogical approach. Therefore, both as preparation for the constructive liturgical work in the last half of my paper and as a further offering to those interested in identifying a theological starting point from which to begin broader conversations in the Sunday School classroom or adult small group, Part II endeavors

to more critically examine the dualistic notions of body and soul so common in our culture that at least implicitly dismiss our bodies as irrelevant to life in the triune God.

Many theologians today attribute the disembodiment of much Christian theology and liturgy to popular forms of dualism embedded in contemporary western worldviews that sharply distinguish between the body and the soul as two essentially unrelated realities, endowing the latter with ultimate significance (i.e., the “real me”) while devaluing the former as “just a shell” or, in the words of Stephanie Paulsell, merely the “prison house of the soul.”[iii] Following from this body-soul split, the soul – as it is somehow independent of and inevitably detachable from the body – frequently receives sole attention in the context of religious life, to the disparagement or, at least, neglect of our essentially embodied existence and with little consideration for incarnation’s fundamental role within Christianity.[iv] Adam G. Cooper summarily defines this false dualism as “the disruption between man and total reality, a disdain for humanity’s real situation, a hatred of our inherently enfleshed, limited life, and a subsequent rejection of our supernatural calling.”[v] Such a dualistic view mistakenly conceives of Christian liturgical practices like baptism or the funeral as acts intended, above all, to help us leave our bodies behind and free our eternal souls from the limited and empty existence of our worldly lives.

Identifying the linkages between this sharply-hierarchical notion of body and soul and some of the lingering ghosts of Christian dualism means that Christians must first acknowledge our own “ambiguous legacy about the body”[vi] and the ways in which Christians have long looked at flesh and bodies with a certain degree of mistrust and even contempt. Lest we believe that Christian traditions offer nothing of value to our discussion of death and bodies, however, much recent scholarship

introduces us to a strikingly different Christian view of human beings and human bodies. As argued by Long, the predominant feature of Christian teachings on the relationship between body and soul is not belief in souls temporarily entrapped within bodies but, rather, an affirmation of human beings that are inherently embodied.[vii] Similarly, Cooper introduces his book, *Life in the Flesh*, by asserting that early Christians “knew that bodily existence exerts a gravitational pull upon our thinking and living, an inescapable force with which we must somehow come to terms.”[viii] Understanding our bodies, therefore, has long been an integral key for helping Christians properly understand ourselves in relation to God and to the material world in which we live and die. More specifically, Christians have traditionally situated themselves within the junction of three distinct but deeply inter-penetrating bodies in order to describe their relationship with the realities of life and death: the textual or canonical body of divine revelation (i.e., the Christian scriptures), the physical body of Christ, and the liturgical body of the church.[ix]

The canonical body

Though not in the precise language of “souls” and “bodies,” Long contends that the second creation account in Genesis 2.4b-25 conceptualizes living human beings as formed by an “inseparable unity” of God’s breath and the dust of the earth.[x] As Cooper asserts, the Tanakh never speaks of the human person simply in terms of the body in itself.[xi] Rather, the human being is identified as *nephesh*,[xii] a word that can be translated as “life,” “vital energy,” or “person.” Not to be overlooked, however, *nephesh* in its literal sense of “throat” is intrinsically tied to the physical breath of the body,[xiii] which the Genesis account explicitly associates with the breath of God itself. Some biblical passages certainly employ the word *nephesh* in ways that approximate another Hebrew

word, *ruach*, often translated as “wind” or “spirit,” and which Cooper defines as roughly equivalent with the Greek psyche as a “spiritual life-force... capable of extension beyond the immediate and physical.”[xiv] Nonetheless, taking Genesis 2 into account, I would argue (and, I think, Cooper would agree)[xv] that *nephesh* likely never speaks to any kind of eternal soul detachable from the life and death of the body. Instead, the Old Testament witnesses to the *ruach* or Spirit of God breathing into and out of a human *nephesh* or “soul” that is inseparably bound up with embodied existence in the act of creation, and, therefore, bound to death just as the body is.[xvi]

Though Hebrew and Greek thought are often treated opposite each other, the languages of the Old and New Testaments at least both distinguish between a “body”- and “soul”-like element to the human person.[xvii] This distinction, however, does not necessarily equate to an unqualified dualism inherent to the emergent Christian tradition, or any spiritual goal of loosening the soul from the grasp of the body.[xviii] Rather, several early strands within the tradition suggest that, even in death, one’s person is bound to the body in highly consequential ways. Paul, for instance, warns: “All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor 5.10).[xix] In other words, we might say that what we do as embodied beings has enduring consequences – before death and in death – for our relationship with God, neighbor and self. Not incongruous with the life of the soul, the body is rather properly treated as spiritual matter. Appealing to the assembly at Rome, Paul exhorts the Romans to present their bodies as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” an offering of the whole body that Paul subsequently describes as our “spiritual worship” (Romans 12.1).[xx] Earnestly taking heed of

Paul's counsel here, I think, would surely change the way Christians in the U.S. today reflect on both troubling funeral practices like embalming and the typically-disembodied liturgical patterns of our prayer and worship lives. Worship of God, like love for God, is a fully embodied way of being—a "whole burnt offering" to God requiring all of the heart, soul, mind and strength inherently carried forward by our bodies. In turn, both Paul and Christ play on the greatest commandments of Torah to re-interpret the fulfillment of God's law in terms of loving our neighbors as ourselves, inevitably fleshed out in the honoring of others' bodies.[xxi]

The incarnate Christ

For Christians, this love for the world is vividly and tangibly modeled in God's own embodiment—in Jesus Christ who is God's love for us enfleshed, dwelling among us and within us. Consistently throughout the New Testament but especially in his death and resurrection, Jesus' own body represents the definitive site in which atonement for the world's sin and God's reconciliation to creation actually happens.[xxii] Undoubtedly, there is an incredible amount of mystery in the various gospel accounts of the bodily-resurrected Christ.[xxiii] Nonetheless, early Christian traditions that have endured and prevailed over more dualistic elements in the church still testify to the most basic Christian conviction that God has come to us in a human body dead, buried and resurrected.[xxiv] In the gospels of Luke and John, Jesus insists on his body: "Look at my hands and my feet. See that it is myself. Touch me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24.39-40).[xxv] In the words of the Nicene Creed, the church affirms that we believe in "one Lord, Jesus Christ" who:

For us and for our salvation...came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became

truly human.[xxvi]

Perhaps most profoundly, the bodily resurrection of Christ substantiates the claim that bodies matter in God's redemptive work. Refuting the idea of salvation reserved for the soul alone and a merely symbolic resurrection, Tertullian asserted that the salvation of our souls is deeply wed to the flesh; we only realize the spiritual blessings of God's grace in that which is physically done to us in rituals such as baptism, the signing of the cross and holy communion.[xxvii] In baptism and the subsequent enactment of word and sacrament, by our very incorporation into and identification with Christ's body, we come to participate in the redemption effected bodily by Christ in his physical death.[xxviii]

The centrality given to embodiment in the Christian tradition, in fact, reflects the everyday ways in which we experience our selves and others. In truth, we only know each other through a "lifetime of small embodiments." [xxix] Illustrating this point and commenting on the popular usage of the word, "soul," Long writes that:

When we say we know our friend's "soul," we do not mean something apart from his body; we are describing the character and personality we have seen through his cumulative embodied actions.[xxx]

Furthermore, the brother or sister in Christ – known in embodied ways, washed in baptism, fed at the table of communion – is known sacramentally in the body, a body in which we receive God's unique and sacred gift of life in this or that person.[xxxi] This sacramental experience of bodies, however, should by no means be construed as limited to Sunday mornings. Rather, the Gospel according to Matthew suggests that our experience of Christ in the body is likely to happen anytime we

encounter those who are hungry, thirsty, unclothed and unsheltered, sick or imprisoned. In other words, to honor bodies is to tend to Christ himself: offering food and drink, welcoming the stranger or immigrant, sheltering the homeless, visiting the prisoner (Matthew 25.31-46). In her book, *Honoring the Body*, Paulsell even invites us into expanding this kind of Christological experience of the body to include the bodily gestures of our everyday lives: bathing and dressing, eating and drinking, working and resting, exercising, caring for our children, loving and suffering. Sharing in our common vulnerability, the incarnate Christ calls the church to great and profound compassion for all of our bodies – not just church bodies – that are at all times sacred gifts in which God might indeed dwell.[xxxii]

Body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit

Commonly cited in recent scholarship on the role of the body in Christianity is Paul's characterization of the body as the "temple of God." Paul, for example, sharply inquires of the Corinthians: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?" (1 Cor 6.19).[xxxiii] Not to be overlooked, Paul masterfully constructs this "temple" language by earlier naming Jesus Christ as the "foundation" already laid for "God's building" (1 Cor 3. 9b-11). Thus, Paul's imagery closely aligns with John's gospel account of Christ. Pitching its tent in the company of the Hebrew tradition,[xxxiv] the gospel's prologue proclaims that "the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us" (John 1.14).[xxxv] Later in Jerusalem, Christ boldly asserts that God dwells not ultimately in the Jerusalem Temple, but in the temple of Christ's own human body destroyed and raised up again (2.21). Read alongside Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians, we might relate our identity as "temples of the Holy Spirit" to our baptismal assimilation into what John identifies as the temple of Christ's

physical body. Identifying our bodies as members of Christ, Paul teaches that we are not our own (1 Cor 6.15, 19-20). Rather, we belong to the body of Christ that is God's.[xxxvi] Simultaneously, we belong to each other, members of one body suffering and rejoicing in common together (12.26).

Importantly, honoring the body involves not only celebrating the joys that we might experience everyday as embodied beings, but also recognizing the severe vulnerabilities of the body—and confessing that sin, or the “sting of death” and worldly decay, inevitably exerts a disfiguring power over our bodies and souls.[xxxvii] Such an acknowledgment is, of course, ever held in tension with the victory promised for us through Christ in baptism. Yet, only after Paul fills in the tensions of death and life, of what is perishable and imperishable, in 1 Corinthians, can he properly exhort the work given to us as the church: “Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor 16.13-14).

This exhortation to love for each other (emblematic of Paul's writings and consistent throughout the entire New Testament) in a world stung by sin and death re-affirms a Christian understanding of life and death that is radically communal: in life and death, our union with the body of Christ binds us to each other as a church body, but also conceivably to our family, friends and neighbors. In truth, all of humanity (and all creation, too) shares in common these fragile and vulnerable bodies[xxxviii]—our frailty seen most starkly in bodies dying or already dead. And, yet, just as Christ shared a body like ours, we must die a death like his if we are, like him, to live a life made alive to God.[xxxix] In 1 Corinthians, Paul defends the true and good news of resurrected bodies with an illustration of what everyone apparently already knows: that “what you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (1 Cor 15.35). Admittedly, the corpse of the one who has died is not exactly the same body to

be raised.[xl] Yet, picking up this Pauline argument, Cooper asserts that the “holiness” of the body resides in its very nature as “seed,” a body that “while lifeless, still speaks of life, still anticipates its own transformation.”[xli] According to Christian teaching, Cooper continues:

If death apparently presents to my experience the end of the body-as-subject, the end of ‘me’; if it forces flesh to its most humble, ‘material’ ebb; if it represents humanity in its weakest, most vulnerable aspect, then, paradoxically, it also presents the conditions for it to be at its strongest and most sublime.[xlii]

Sown in dishonor, we are raised in glory; sown in weakness, we are raised in power (1 Cor 15.43). Paul helps us to see each person as a “bare seed,” body and soul born in the image of dust, enlivened by the breath of God, and united now through baptism with Christ to bear the body and image of heaven.[xliii] Such recognition of bodily vulnerability and embodied transformation empowers Christians to understand our personal solidarity with every other body, seeing every body as “a fragile temple of God’s Spirit and worthy of care.”[xliv]

– *to be continued*

[i] Ronald L. Grimes helpfully suggests that we must move beyond the notion that “the meaning of a ritual consists of the ideas that theologians and pastors thought when they first constructed them” (1995: 8). In other words, we must pay attention to the performance of liturgy as much as we do to the words used. Thus, as I think Long recognizes, the work of reforming contemporary Christian funerals and other liturgical practices should not be seen as simply modernizing the “script.” Instead, we must also pay attention to the ritual “pathologies” of our practices—what Grimes describes as the ways in which rituals sometimes “fail

gesturally, posturally, and ‘actionally’” (Ibid. 8-9).

[ii] See Long 2009: 102-103; Merton 1969: 84-85.

[iii] Paulsell 2002: 16. While Long characterizes this modern dualism as a “pop form of Platonism” (2009: 22-23) and Adam G. Cooper associates it with a resurgence of certain forms of Gnosticism (2008: 2-3), the work of those like Karen L. King has done much to problematize the use of such overarching labels. In relation to our discussion of dualism here, see especially King 2003: 192-201 for a critical re-examination – based on several “Gnostic” texts themselves – of the tendency to define Gnosticism as always and essentially dualistic.

[iv] Long 2009: 23.

[v] Cooper 2008: 3.

[vi] Paulsell 2002: 5.

[vii] Long 2009: 24.

[viii] Cooper 2008: 3.

[ix] Ibid. 32.

[x] Long 2009: 24. Genesis 2.7, 9 and 19 together further suggest that God brings all of life (human, plant, and animal) into existence out of the dust of the earth.

[xi] Cooper 2008: 13.

[xii] Importantly, Cooper argues that verses such as Psalm 63.2-3 (“My soul [*nephesh*] thirsts for you, and my flesh [*basar*] yearns for you”) do not evidence a biblical division between the psychic and the physical, but rather a “two-tiered synecdochal, poetic intensification” in which *basar* refers to and embodies *nephesh*. Citing Johannes Pedersen, Cooper further

points out that other biblical passages freely speak of the heart as soul, blood as soul, bones as soul, bowels as soul, or the eyes as soul—demonstrating that the OT generally identifies the whole person with any bodily organ in which psychic energy is intensified or concentrated (Ibid. 12-13).

[xiii] Ibid. 13.

[xiv] Ibid. 13.

[xv] Indeed, citing Pedersen and Eichrodt, Cooper generally seems to agree with Long: that a human soul or *nephesh* from the biblical perspective “indicates a personal, subsistent force, in principle inseparable from the flesh, always manifested outwardly ‘in the whole carriage of the body’, ‘a vital potentiality indissolubly connected with the body’ and therefore ‘susceptible to the grip of death’” (Ibid. 13).

[xvi] See also Ezekiel 37.1-14.

[xvii] Bucking much of modern biblical scholarship that treats Hebrew and Greek thought as “though they were two independent, monolithic views of reality,” based on the work of Barr and Eichrodt, Cooper actually draws out several points of alignment between them (Ibid. 11-13).

[xviii] Cooper, for example, interprets the binary, dualistic terms of the NT not as “strict ontological opposites” but rather as “contingent, functional dualities, eschatologically ordered towards a certain unitary goal” (Ibid. 39).

[xix] See also Matthew 5.30.

[xx] I.e., “Christianity is to have one’s body shaped, one’s habits determined, in such a manner that the worship of God is unavoidable” (Stanley Hauerwas, cited in Cooper 2008: 36).

[xxi] Compare Romans 12.1-21, 13.8-10 with Matthew 22.34-40, Luke 10.25-28, and Mark 12.28-34, paying particular attention to the way in which totalizing love of God is used in Mark to re-describe worship of God (presumably among a community at the time of the gospel's composition trying to make sense of a world outside the sacrificial system of a Temple that had been leveled by the Roman empire).

[xxii] Ibid. 42. Also, see 1 Pet 2.24, Col 1.22, 2 Cor 5.18-19; as well as Hebrews 10.10, 20 in relation with Mark 15.38.

[xxiii] Considering Christ's ability to enter through locked doors or be physically present in multiple and distant geographical locations in a short span of time, Cooper notes that Christ's "physical body seems to possess a fluidity that defies the 'normal' limits and boundaries of bodily human existence" (Ibid. 46). For Cooper's full discussion of the relationship between Christ's flesh and his resurrection, 45-49. I would add, however, that in the context of the miracle stories so commonplace in all of the gospel accounts (e.g., in which Christ quite naturally heals the blind and lame, walks on water or physically multiplies loaves and fishes), the stories of Christ's body resurrected in the flesh and yet still capable of the miraculous are in no way inconsistent with the gospels' general physiology.

[xxiv] Paulsell 2002: 17. The NT "shows us that we may believe in [Christ] only if we believe in his corporeal resurrection. For life without a body is not human life. This is the content of the New Testament" (Barth, cited in Cooper 2008: 48).

[xxv] Cited in Paulsell 2002: 180. See also John 20.19-20, 27.

[xxvi] ELW 2006: 104, based on materials prepared by the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), published in *Praying Together*, 1988 (see "Acknowledgments," ELW 2006: 1169).

[xxvii] Cited in Cooper 2008: 65.

[xxviii] Ibid. 42.

[xxix] Long 2009: 25.

[xxx] Long 2009: 25.

[xxxi] Long 2009: 31.

[xxxii] See Paulsell 2002: 3, 9-10.

[xxxiii] See also 1 Cor 3.16-17.

[xxxiv] As Cooper points out, John's language seems to quite intentionally evoke the OT imagery of God's long-established physical presence among the people of Israel, represented in the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, and the Temple of Jerusalem (2008: 50-51).

[xxxv] Cooper's translation, Ibid. 50.

[xxxvi] In the context of 1 Corinthians as a whole, of course, we should remember that Paul's letter begins with an appeal to the assembly at Corinth to stop its in-fighting about who each of its members belongs to (1 Cor 1.11-12).

[xxxvii] See 1 Cor 15.56.

[xxxviii] Paulsell 2002: 13.

[xxxix] See Romans 6.5-11.

[xl] See 1 Cor 15.37-38.

[xli] Cooper 2008: 5.

[xlii] Ibid. 5.

[xliii] See 1 Cor 15.45-49.

[xliv] Paulsell 2002: 13. See 1 Cor 6.19-20.

Death, Life, and Baptism (1)

Colleagues,

A brilliant full moon made shadows on the snow in Northeastern Ohio a week ago last night. The sight was beautiful. Tonight we're well into the waning, a persistent reminder to people like me, on the far side of 45, that darkness comes soon. Too soon.

Our topic for the next three weeks is death, and God's response to it in Jesus Christ. The timeliness of the topic will be obvious. We are barreling toward Holy Week, with its capstone in the great Three Days—the Triduum, as the in-crowd likes to say. Here is our annual plunge into the core of the Christian faith, the astonishing assertion, spelled out at length from Maundy Thursday through Holy Saturday, that, in the crucifixion of Jesus the Jew, none other than God Almighty was sucked into the black hole that sin swirls into deadly, crushing existence; whereupon God did the impossible and broke the hole open. That he did this “for us and for our salvation” is certified by the baptisms that are always remembered and sometimes administered at Easter Vigil services.

Today's writer, Craig F. Simenson, joins Luther and a great host of others, both historical and contemporary, in arguing that Christian people need to pay attention to these matters not once a year but every day. Simenson's case for this is laid out in a four-year-old paper that served as his Senior Thesis at Harvard

Divinity School. In it he drives toward a specific proposal for using the classic offices of Morning and Evening Prayer to get people doing this. Of greater interest to you in these weeks of Lent will be the rationale he assembles for pushing the proposal. Many of you will find much of it to be familiar stuff. Still, read anyway, and see how a gifted and well-read seminarian puts the argument together for the decade we're in and the generation he represents. We think you'll learn some things along the way, and you'll certainly emerge on the other end thanking God for Craig, and for all others who are using the waxing phase of their living-into-death to grab hold of the Gospel, make it their own, and pass it along as others have before them.

Three quick words, the first about procedure: Craig's paper is a long and meaty piece of work, so for Thursday Theology purposes we've carved out some key portions and will send you three of them between now and Holy Week. Another one or two may follow at some point in the Easter season. We'll see. If you'd like the paper in its entirety, drop a note to the undersigned at jburceATattDOTnet.

Second, a little bit about Craig, with more to follow in subsequent weeks. After earning his M.Div. at Harvard, he headed for a "Lutheran year"—a requirement for ordination in the ELCA—at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. That was followed by an internship in Nebraska and the course in Clinical Pastoral Education that the ELCA also requires of candidates for pastoral ministry. Exhilarated by that, he accepted an invitation to stick around for another year of chaplaincy work. Then it was back to Chicago to earn a Th.M. (Master of Theology) at LSTC. Last November the saints of Grace Lutheran Church in Darlington, Wisconsin, extended him a call. He began serving there early last month. By all means keep him in your prayers as he approaches his first encounter as a

pastor with the rigors of Holy Week and Easter Sunday.

Finally, an apology: try as I might, I can't get my email program to assign Arabic numerals to Craig's several endnotes in place of the Roman ones that you'll struggle with here. Let me count on your patience.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From **“‘Make us Die Every Day’: Baptism, Death, and Daily Prayer”**

Craig F. Simenson

March, 2011

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Introduction

Beginning to end, matters of life and death lie at the heart of Christianity. “By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ... united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ.”[i] So go the words that open the order of Holy Baptism among Lutherans in my own home tradition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Similar refrains, however, can be heard proclaimed in different churches the world over at the event of Christian baptism. This baptismal language—of dying and rising, of death and rebirth—so familiar among the faithful down the centuries has long proclaimed that the two most undeniable poles of creaturely existence do not in truth exist independent from each other. Baptism makes clear that death is not merely the crucial transition at the end of life—not merely a key point of closure—but also an opening and the key turning point in the living out of all our days.

Still, many churches in the United States today are just as likely to avoid any careful and sustained consideration of what this baptismal link might mean for our own physical

death. Instead, as suggested by many trends that have re-shaped the American funeral in the last century, it seems that we often live in the shadow of a culture fearfully in denial of death [Part I below], and one that frequently implies that our bodies are of secondary importance to the religious life [Part II, per next week's post *-ed.*]

Part 1. The American way of death denial: The modern funeral as case study

In his seminal work, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker describes the terror of death as “one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought.”[ii] Undoubtedly, at a “working level,” our human aversion to death comes quite naturally and is often necessary for us to assume the various responsibilities of our everyday lives.[iii] Fear that is by all means natural and appropriate, however, arguably becomes deadening in much more deceiving forms when it veers towards a denial of our natural limits as beings that live and die. Left unexamined in the darkest corners of our daily lives, our unacknowledged fear of death is likely to overwhelm us in the end and operate in our lives now as an “endless source of bad decisions and selfish action”[iv]—what, in other words, Christians call “sin.” Alarming, then, much evidence suggests that the American culture surrounding death today might most aptly be described as death denying. Against this larger societal backdrop, Christians need not think of a steady and honest encounter with death as either frightening or morbid. Rather, the vision of Christian baptism offers us a straightforward view of death so that we might live every day of our lives without fear—in the in-breaking light of God’s tender compassion—empowered again and again to set our feet to walking in the ways of peace, joy and gratitude in this world (Luke 1.78-79).[v] Before turning to the scriptural basis and liturgical grounding for this baptismal vision in detail, I

begin by looking more closely at some general trends in American funeral practices which suggest some of what I believe are the most problematic ways in which these popular practices conceal the realities of death and our healthy fear of it. Local church leaders interested in starting more engaged conversations within their communities about end-of-life issues and funeral preparation for themselves or loved ones might take cues from the discussion below. However, raising greater awareness in our churches about the details of funeral practices and Christian teachings on death and life will likely benefit anyone struggling with the various forms of death present to us along just about every part of this life's journey.

Tracing a Christian pattern to death and the funeral

In Thomas G. Long's recent book, *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, he argues that over the last two centuries Christian funeral practices in the U.S. have lost many of their distinctly Christian marks. Long notes that a basic and distinct Christian funeral rite—borrowing largely from first Hebrew and then Roman customs—can be detected by the late fourth century AD composed of three movements: preparation, processional and burial.[vi] Since these early beginnings, Christians have theologically framed funerals as the completion of baptism and the church's final procession with the dead to their burial, a movement of bodies accompanied simultaneously by both hope and grieving.[vii] Liturgically, the gospel script of Christ-crucified-and-resurrected-in-the-body was proclaimed in both words and action. Bodies of the dead in Christ were (at least gradually) not avoided to the extent dictated by other contemporary Hebrew customs concerned with the ritual impurity of corpses.[viii] Neither were the bodies treated as marginal to this particular phase on the journey of faith. We might even think of the dead as participants themselves in the funeral's witness to baptism's

final call. According to Long, members of the *ekklesia* [house church/congregation] themselves prepared the bodies of their dead in their homes by washing, anointing and clothing them in linen cloth or eventually white garments signifying baptism.[ix] Church leaders such as Tertullian of Carthage, John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo advised that Christians refrain from the loud cries of mourning or the dirges of flute players typical of Jewish and Roman traditions and express their sorrow instead with reverent silence, prayer, psalms and hymns.[x] Carrying the corpse with them, the community then proceeded to the gravesite together as an assembled body, before commending the dead to God and burying them in the earth. After placing the body in the ground, they would usually eat of the Lord's Supper—understood as Christ's body and blood—either at the grave or in the home.[xi]

For Long, this early pattern of the Christian funeral was based in the belief that the dead were saints, holy ones, children adopted by God, sisters and brothers to be accompanied in their union with the resurrected Christ, bodies worthy to be honored and embraced with tender care.[xii] Even in the midst of plague, a third-century letter by Dionysius of Alexandria suggests the lack of fear that characterized a Christian willingness to embrace the dead:

With willing hands they raised the bodies of the saints to their bosoms; they closed their eyes and mouths, carried them on their shoulders, and laid them out; they clung to them, embraced them, and wrapped them in grave clothes.[xiii]

Moreover, while care of the dead who were of the “household of faith” was privileged above others, churches established a reputation in the Roman world for looking beyond their own membership. Controversial in their greater Roman milieu,

Margaret Miles emphasizes that early churches volunteered to take care of the bodies of both their brothers and sisters, and anyone else around them in need.[xiv]

The neglected bodies of the dead

In contrast to this Christian rite of death, Long characterizes Christian funerals today as increasingly mere memorial events—with the body cosmetically altered, sheltered in a tank-like casket or made near-completely invisible, and the service personalized to the point of marginalizing its larger baptismal backdrop.[xv] Often, rather than turning us to genuinely face the dead, such services tend to sentimentalize death and rely on loosely-biblical but popular notions of a heavenly “afterlife” divorced from any explicit reference to the triune God.[xvi] Traditional patterns still persist in many worship hymnals but, understandably, many Christian clergy have embraced these recent developments as preferable to the “older, often depersonalized, and more somber rituals of the past.”[xvii] If done skillfully, I certainly agree with Long that many of these trends might be employed in ways that can accentuate the relevance of the dead’s Christian witness to resurrection. Yet, in doing so, churches must be reminded that as Christians we testify to a bodily resurrection from the dead, a death already rehearsed in the sacrament of baptism and one that calls us to a straightforward encounter with our everyday fears.

These recent funeral trends within the church are, of course, part of a much larger shift within North American society as a whole. In her book, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, Jessica Mitford exposed several tenets of what she called the “new mythology, essential to the twentieth-century American funeral rite, [that] has grown up—or rather has been built up step-by-step—to justify the peculiar customs

surrounding the disposal of our dead.”[xviii] Indeed, funeral industry norms such as embalming or “burial vaults” deny (and even audaciously attempt to defy) the realities of human embodiment that involve inevitable physical decay. In the case of the “burial vault,” these outer receptacles—made of a variety of durable materials and designed to protect the casket and the body within it from the elements of disintegration during their “eternal sojourn in the grave”—once rare, are now required by most cemeteries.[xix]

While mandated neither by law or religious teaching,[xx] nor proven as an effective or even necessary guard against health and sanitation concerns, nor widely used anywhere outside of North America, embalming or “restorative art” is now so universal in the U.S. that for a long time funeral directors have done it routinely, without consulting the wishes of corpse or kin.[xxi] When American embalming was first introduced, and while still typically done in the home, Mitford notes that it was often expected that a family member would stay with the embalmer in order to witness the procedure.[xxii] Today, however, despite its popular perpetuation, few of us know any details about the practice. At bottom, though embalming seldom preserves bodies beyond the timeline of the funeral, the arduous chemical and cosmetic work involved is intended to present those mourning with a final beautiful, happy and healthy “memory picture” of the dead. On the one hand, embalming and the related American phenomena of the open-casket ceremony do not cast the body completely out of our view. This embalmed last glimpse, however, shows us neither the body we knew nor death’s true face. Rather, we are presented with the person we loved concealed behind make-up and cosmetic alterations, and literally reduced to an emptied and then artificially-filled casing.[xxiii] Underlying this standard industry procedure is the insidious idea that the dead

must be presented in “the semblance of normality... unmarred by the ravages of illness, disease or mutilation”—though few die (or live, for that matter) in a way that would actually fit this supposed “norm.”[xxiv]

The neglected bodies of the living

Yet, funerals have become disembodied not only in the sense that the bodies of our dead have increasingly been disguised or made marginal but also, relatedly, in the sense that those mourning now have very little liturgical contact either with the bodies of the dead or their own bodies. Such disembodiment of the American funeral has taken hold in both our ritual language and practice. Linguistically, the plain and direct language of the past has largely been replaced with more “ornate” and euphemistic terminology: the “undertaker” has become the “funeral director” or “mortician,” offering services in what has gone from being the “funeral parlor” to the “funeral home” to oftentimes now simply the “chapel”;[xxv] coffins become “caskets”; hearses now known as “coaches” or “professional cars”; bodies of the dead generally referred to simply as “remains”; death itself spoken of as merely “passing away” or “expiration.”[xxvi] Such language, much of it first spawned within various trade publications of the funeral industry, has trickled into popular culture in trends that have increasingly shielded those mourning from speaking directly to our fear of death. Granted, as Lathrop points out, the “hard and messy work of actually dying” is also not typically evoked in traditional Christian liturgy.[xxvii] Still, death remains a constant presence and integral element to the Christian scriptures, creeds and sacraments. Framed in this context, there is a strong precedent for church leaders to avoid slipping into misdirected turns of phrase that keep us unhelpfully circling around our fears of death.

Members of the church body have also accepted many funeral trends that have increasingly allowed us to avoid any physical contact with our dead, their coffins and the very earth into which they are buried.[xxviii] Though perhaps for more practical than theological reasons, American funerals and the handling of the dead up until the nineteenth century were still performed largely by family and close friends. With remarkable parallels to the earlier-cited account of Dionysius, Mitford highlights that just over a hundred years ago in the U.S., it was family and friends who typically:

washed and laid out the body, draped it in a winding sheet, and ordered the coffin from the local carpenter. It was they who carried the coffin on foot from the home to the church and thence to the graveyard, and who frequently—unless the church sexton was available—dug the grave... Between the death and funeral, the body lay in the family parlor, where the mourners took turns watching over it, the practical reason for this being the ever-present possibility that signs of life might be observed.[xxix]

Today, we have given this care for the dead over almost exclusively to professional funeral directors and “allied industries” such as cemeteries, florists, monument makers and vault manufacturers.[xxx] Friends and family—and even pallbearers—increasingly have merely “honorary” roles, as hydraulically operated devices or funeral professionals now typically prepare, transport, transfer, and bury our dead.[xxxi]

Obviously, as Long acknowledges, we do not have the option of “going back to a bygone era.”[xxxii] Christian funerals will invariably be different now than they were centuries and even decades ago. Yet, for those of us who recognize the

transformative value of understanding life and death in terms of an embodied, daily and baptismal journey towards God, I agree with Long that we can still find powerful ways to re-locate these traditional markers in the liturgy of the Christian funeral. To do so, however, I believe that we must also look beyond the funeral itself to face common misunderstandings about the salvific role of the body and Christian baptism.

– to be continued

[i] Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) 2006: 227.

[ii] Becker 1973: 11.

[iii] Ibid. 2.

[iv] Lathrop 2006: 128.

[v] See Ibid. 127; Merton 1969: 86.

[vi] Long 2009: 71. Even earlier, at the beginning of the third century AD, Long highlights that Tertullian references an “appointed office” for Christian burial in North Africa.” For full discussion on the origins of the Christian funeral, see 59-72.

[vii] Ibid. 71-72.

[viii] Long cites texts such as the fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions, marked by its strong rebuke of Jewish purity laws, as evidence that some Christians were apparently observing such practices (Ibid. 63-65). For two seemingly-opposing angles on the relevance of ritual purity within the NT itself, compare Matthew 23.27/Luke 11.44 (and the ritual significance they place on the unclean graves of the dead) against Mark 7.14-15 (and its apparent substitution of inward purity for external purity rules). Interestingly, each of

these statements is in fact attributed to Jesus.

[ix] Admittedly, even among Christians, a family's wealth likely determined how elaborate the funeral ceremony would be and the extent to which family members personally attended to the dead body. See Ibid. 67, 69.

[x] Ibid. 69-70. Note Jesus' dismissal of the flute players and mournful tumult in Matt 9.23-24.

[xi] Long 2009: 71.

[xii] Ibid. 71-72. For this language of adoption into the "household of faith," see Galatians 3.23-4.7.

[xiii] Long 2009: 65.

[xiv] Miles 2008: 13. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6.10).

[xv] Long 2009: 58. For important discussion on the rise of cremation in U.S., see Mitford 2000: 111-122, and Lynch 2010.

[xvi] Lathrop 2006: 127-128, but also Long 2009: 57-59.

[xvii] Ibid. 58-59. Importantly, Long notes that this modern shift is not completely universal throughout the U.S.—currently most pronounced among white, suburban Protestants, but not as prevalent in rural areas, among nonwhites, and Catholics. Still, Long warns that modern trends are increasingly changing funeral practices for all Christians.

[xviii] Mitford 2000: 15-16.

[xix] Ibid. 36-38.

[xx] Mitford dismisses the claim that modern American practices

of embalming are rooted in early "Judeo-Christian beliefs," (Ibid. 140-144). Also, see Mitford's informative treatment of the funeral industry's rather thin defense of embalming along hygienic and therapeutic lines (54-69).

[xxi] Ibid. 43.

[xxii] Ibid. 44. For full and graphic description of the embalming process, see 43-49.

[xxiii] Ibid. 16. For an interesting discussion of the open-casket ceremony, a custom simply assumed in the U.S. but unknown in many other parts of the world, see 50, 63-66.

[xxiv] Ibid. 47, directly citing from J. Sheridan Mayer's Restorative Art.

[xxv] Ibid. 38. While Christians might initially warm to such explicitly religious nomenclature, Mitford suggests that the turn towards language of the "chapel" simply and conveniently circumvents the word "funeral." Highlighting the commercial benefits of this kind of "religious" terminology, she continues: "The chapel proper is a simulated place of worship. Because it has to be all things to all people, it is subject to a quick change by wheeling into place a 'devotional chapel set' appropriate to the religion being catered to at the moment—a Star of David, a cross, a statue of the Virgin, and so on" (38). Similarly, Long 2009: 91.

[xxvi] Mitford 2000: 17, 51-53.

[xxvii] Lathrop 2006: 126.

[xxviii] Among some church traditions, funerals have even been largely replaced by memorial services that celebrate the life of the dead with photographs and flowers, but without the body of the dead actually present (see Mitford 2000: 214; Long 2009:

83-84).

[xxix] Mitford 2000: 147-148.

[xxx] For more on the various stakeholders involved in the funeral industry, Ibid. 70-80.

[xxxi] Ibid. 51.

[xxxii] Long 2009: 90.