

“Fail, for Christ’s sake!” A Dose of Luther for Lent, 2015

Colleagues,

I don’t mean to confuse you. When you get to today’s offering, you’ll see immediately that it was keyed to last year’s celebration of the Reformation. Why then the “Lent” of the title above? Answer #1: because it is Lent. Answer #2: because the essay you’ll be reading revolves around Philippians 2:5ff, the classic Epistle for Palm Sunday. Today’s writer, Mike Hoy, will give us a distilled version of Martin Luther’s exposition of the passage in a sermon he preached on that day in 1519. Mike’s aim, of course, is to get us thinking about the timeliness and urgency of Luther’s insights for our circumstances today, and that he’ll do. I suspect this will be the first time that any of us have been urged so directly to aim for failing grades. No, let me correct that: it will be the first time we’ve noticed in quite this way that our Lord has been urging failure on us all along. See, for example, the Gospel text for this coming Second Sunday in Lent ([Mark 8:31-38](#); Year B, Revised Common Lectionary).

By the way, if you’ve been following Crossings posts for any length of time, Mike will need no introduction. [Our website](#) is graced with a heap of his solid work, and if you’ve purchased either of Bob Bertam’s posthumously published books, you’ll have noticed that Mike was the editor. It’s good to hear from him again in Thursday Theology.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Righteousness as Losing-getting all “Fs” for the sake of the Gospel

Some reflections for Reformation 2014

2017 will mark the 500th year of the Reformation, traced back to Luther’s Ninety Five Theses. Several commemorations are already going on, especially in Europe, where they are in their seventh year leading up to this celebration.

How, in 2014, should the church be *ecclesia semper reformanda* [i.e. the church undergoing constant reformation—ed.]? A few months ago I was trying to track down the source of some profound insights that speak to the church as one in missional engagement, finally finding them (Aha!) in Luther’s sermon on “The Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1519—believed to have been his Palm Sunday sermon). I have provided you with the “cliff notes” of that sermon in the pages that follow, shortening his 10 pages down to 3 (see below, *Ecclesia semper reformanda 2014: Revisiting Luther’s “Two Kinds of Righteousness”*). I hope these may prove useful in further reflection. What I have for today are five themes that may provide us some insight for Reformation 2014.

The overall theme is seeing how righteousness comes by losing, not by winning. It applies to Christ himself, based on theme of Philippians 2 (NRSV; regarded by many as an early Christian hymn, and the epistle reading in the Church’s lectionary for both Palm Sunday and again recently on Lectionary 26, Sept. 25-Oct. 1, Year A!):

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God

as something to be exploited [Luther: grasped],
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave [Luther: servant; and here Luther's
text ends, but we continue],
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.
[Then the upswing; but that is not as significant to Luther's
exposition here, because the emphasis is on how we lose with
Christ crucified]
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The emphasis we may take from Luther and the Reformation for
this year is how we can see (for Christ and ourselves) how
righteousness is losing—getting all F's for the sake of the
gospel.

1. **Fröhliche Wechsel: How Christ became re-Formed for us** The
first F is for “Fröhliche Wechsel,” which translated from
the original German means “happy exchange” (or “blessed
exchange;” Bob Bertram used to call it the “Sweet Swap”).
We start with this because it is the basis of the most
significant kind of righteousness that makes us whole—the
alien (to us) righteousness that comes from Christ to us,
a righteousness we cannot attain or achieve on our own. It

is how Christ takes from us what we have coming to us—our sin, our weakness, our death, our most grievous faults—and gives to us instead what he has coming to the One who is (per Paul to the Philippians) in the “form of God.” That was not the “form” he chose for us. That “form” he gave up in order to take on another “form”—the form of a servant, a slave, an obedient child, even to the point of death on a cross. Why? Because that is where we are, by virtue also of an evil that comes to us from without, but also within, from birth as children of the first Adam—our original sin. This was an important theme in the Reformation of the early 1500s. The teaching of the church at that time (and today?) was that we needed to clean up our acts with regard to all our “actual sins,” and neglected the core root of our “original sin” from which all actual sins proceed as fruit. One will notice that when Luther speaks of the two kinds of righteousness, he considers both of them Christian—the second righteousness being our fruits of the alien righteousness in good works for the sake of others (which is, of course, juxtaposed to the problem of our actual sins). But the exchange of Christ for us is to overcome the darkness of our sin; and from that exchange, any and all good works proceed.

It is important to note here that the Reformers did not neglect the teaching about good works. That was never their intent, though we have often neglected them in our un-Reformation-like teaching sometimes about justification, as if good works were inherently evil. Not so. Not for Luther, nor for the other confessors of that era. But without the “happy exchange,” anything we might venture as works of our own are meaningless and fruitless. So that is why we need to grasp this first F—that Christ grasped has grasped us, and did it freely and willingly.

At the heart of Luther's gospel in this sermon is this message:

"The 'form of God' is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness—and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject. He was pre-eminent in such attributes as are particularly proper to the form of God. Yet he was not haughty in that form; he did not please himself (Rom. 15:3); nor did he disdain and despise those who were enslaved and subjected to various evils. He was not like the Pharisee who said, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men' (Luke 18:11), for that man was delighted that others were wretched; at any rate he was unwilling that they should be like him. This is the type of robbery by which a man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God's, nor does he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God, sufficient in themselves, pleasing themselves, glorying in themselves, under obligation to no one, and so on. Not thus, however, did Christ think; not of this stamp was his wisdom. He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied himself, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils. And although he was free, as the Apostle also says of himself also (1 Cor. 9:19), he made himself servant of all (Mark 9:35), living as if all the evils which were ours were actually his own." (LW 31:301)

2. **Failings, admitted penitently** The second F is for Failings, admitted penitently. The first thesis of the Reformation

squares this up as the most central understanding of what it means to be a Christian—that we repent. “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of *repentance*.” (LW 31:25)

Thus in this righteousness we have from Christ, it is part and parcel of our being via baptism that we live that righteousness “whenever [we] are truly *repentant*.” (LW 31:297) Confessing our sins is not the only confessing we do, but it is the first one that understands that any righteousness we have is not going to come from us, our works, our indulgences, or anything else we contrive.

Today, we have a lot of failings to admit, not the least of which is that we are dying. (In another piece I am working on, I will note the overarching truth of our culture—that is a culture of despair, which is the same as saying a culture that is unwilling and perhaps unable to accept the truth of its death.) The fact that we are dying is not the deepest truth, however. Even in faithfulness, you will die. But you can also die unfaithfully; and that is the greater evil.

Whom we have failed is a whole multitude. Luther speaks of all who are “unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we,” “the poor, the orphans, and the widows” as “the neighbor.” (LW 31:304, 306) We have failed that neighbor in grasping our own sense of righteousness over against this very same neighbor, even in boasting of ourselves as righteous while denying this neighbor. Might the list of neighbor-denying get murkier? When we castigate gays and lesbians (as, it seems, will still be the mantra for Catholicism in the immediate future, but also among many mainliners and conservative religious movements)? When we do not understand why it is that the “nones” make no claim

to religious preference? When we say we are open to all but cannot seem to break down the walls and barriers of our own ethnic pride? When we in the church dismiss one another and develop a reputation of exiling and shooting our wounded, even among our own professionals? Might all of these, and many more examples, point to how we have missed our “neighbor” whom we have explicitly denied because we have not seen *failing* for them as a good thing? Notice how also this failing extends to those public individuals who are those placed into responsible offices “to punish and judge evil men [and why?], *to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who does this. They are his servants in this very matter.*” (LW 31:305) I have met many such public individuals who did not understand their office as connected with the least of these, and even have a few of my own sins to confess in this regard as a public individual in the church. But also, among the private individuals, even these “seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a great number.” Yet they cannot see how they are denying the very basis of a hope that unites them with their neighbor. Justice is only understood as “*my justice*”—never mind the neighbor!

Which leads us to the next F.

3. **Form of servants; our being re-Formed for others** Maybe at the heart of the Re-formation is understanding and grasping by faith our need to be re-Formed for others, even as Christ was re-Formed for us. As Luther explicates this, we, like Christ, have the same mind when we take on this form of a servant and give up the form of God to which we so often want to grasp. In keeping with the Philippians text, “The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in

accordance with the example of Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the 'form of God,' so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it (II Cor. 6:10—'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'), as one of those who lack it. Paul's meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God's gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor's weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own." (LW 31:302)

Taking on the other "form"—that of the servant—is to place oneself beneath the other for the sake of the other. I admit it would be difficult for any of us to have that spirit of Re-form-ation, apart from the life our Lord lived for us and lives for us still. Luther also seemed to think so. Notice his commentary on the story of Simon and the woman who weeps, anoints, and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. Which of these has succeeded, and which had failed? "In like manner he [Christ] will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may

only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor's shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor's. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but that of another.... It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor's condition were better than its own, and if its neighbor's condition is better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better." (LW 31:303-304) As Luther would go on to say, "that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed." (LW 31:305) I have no doubt that it will.

But the truly vibrant, living form is that of being the servant of others. It means taking what gifts we have and understanding that these "forms of God" that we so dearly cling to are not meant to be held on to, but given away, freely, as Christ gave freely for us. ☐☐I have been for a long time now a proponent of missional church. It was a strong accent of my most recent parish ministry. It engaged me and our congregational community with the greater city community in which we were rooted. Are we willing to be a church without walls, taking on the form of those who are around us, embracing them, even celebrating their gifts and seeing these "neighbors" as our partners in ministry. This re-forming is a form of dying, to be sure. But it is a dying with Christ.

4. **Forgiveness**The fourth F is forgiveness.

"In the second class are those who do not desire

vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5:40), to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their own cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of god, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture therefore they are called 'fatherless,' 'widows,' 'desolate'; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their 'Father' and 'Judge' (Ps. 68:5—'Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.'). Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also... Therefore those in this second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved (Matt. 5:44—'But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'). This is the gospel and the example of Christ (Luke 23:34—'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.').” (LW 31:305-306)

“In the third class are those who in persuasion are like the second type just mentioned, but they are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because

they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. These are called 'zealots' and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice." (LW 31:306)

Both of these classes, as Luther lifts them up here, remind me of themes I have noted in Desmond Tutu, who said, "without forgiveness, there is no future." Tutu, also (and like Martin Luther King) understood the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice. Few make that distinction, though I find also those glimpses of it even in Luther who noted the proper role of public individuals. The forgiveness that was practiced in South Africa liberated the oppressors by forgiving them, granting them amnesty.

Are we that forgiving?

5. **Ferguson: a test case** As we think of another F—and by the way, I think also a time of crisis, and maybe even a time for confessing—there is the one that is closest to home for us: Ferguson, Missouri.

My own experience of Ferguson was seeing what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil" where a public official follows orders without recognizing that maybe there is something inherently evil about those orders. I see a police officer who followed protocol and training, and a young man left shot to death in the streets. I weep over this. Some, and many among authorities, have tried to justify the incident; but there is no justification for

this.

Instead, I would have us look back on the prior “F’s” and see if they give us some clue as to how we might rethink all of what Ferguson represents as the glaring “F” of our time. So in the questions that follow, please keep in mind that this is all preliminary, but I hope helpful:

What does it mean for us to truly understand that our Lord placed himself in the midst of those very lives which have been most ravaged by sin—which includes the deadly sin of racism and its effects—even dying with criminals and outcasts, making the harsh truth of their (our) lives his, and his life theirs (ours)?

How do we admit our failings in overcoming white privilege, pride, power, and experiences that cannot even begin to truly comprehend what is really going on in the hearts and minds and lives of others who do not have that privilege, pride, power, and experience?

How might taking the form of a servant be placing the least of these above our own lives, even embracing them as partners with us in ministry for the good of the whole world?

How can we treasure again that we are people who are nothing ourselves without forgiveness; and in welcoming that forgiveness, might we become then a people of that forgiveness for others?

Ecclesia semper reformanda 2014: Revisiting Luther’s “Two Kinds of Righteousness”^[i]

The fuller text that is the basis of Luther’s reflection: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Phil. 2:5-7]

“There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man’s sin is of two kinds.

“The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without... This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly *repentant*.”^[ii] “Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours...”^[iii] This first righteousness is juxtaposed to our original sin, “likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone.”^[iv]

The second kind of righteousness: “our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is the manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self... In the second place, this righteousness consists in love to one’s neighbor, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God... This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence...”^[v] This second type of righteousness is “set opposite to our own actual sin.”^[vi]

Luther then goes into a lengthy exposition of the text of Philippians 2, concluding with this point: “The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in accordance with the example of

Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the 'form of God,' so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it (II Cor. 6:10^[vii]), as one of those who lack it. Paul's meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God's gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor's weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own."^[viii] Luther then examines further a corollary text in Luke 7:36-50 (Simon the Pharisee, whom Luther calls Simon the leper, and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, whom Luther calls Mary Magdalene). "Simon the leper is now nothing but a sinner. He who seemed to himself so righteous sits divested of the glory of the form of God, humiliated in the form of a servant, willy-nilly. On the other hand, Christ honors Mary with the form of God and elevates her above Simon.... How great were the merits which neither she nor Simon saw. Her faults are remembered no more. Christ ignored the form of servitude in her whom he has exalted with the form of sovereignty. Mary is nothing but righteous, elevated into the glory of the form of God..."^[ix]

"In like manner he [Christ] will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them

more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor's shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor's. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but that of another... It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor's condition were better than its own, and if its neighbor's condition is better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better."^[x]

Luther then turns to the question of proper chastisement of evil (contra lawlessness) by classifying people into two groups: public and private individuals.

Public individuals are those placed into responsible offices *"to punish and judge evil men, to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who does this. They are his servants in this very matter..."*^[xi]

Private individuals are classified in three kinds.

"First, there are those who seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a great number. Paul tolerates such people, but he does not approve of them"^[xii].... Nevertheless such will not enter

the kingdom of heaven unless they have changed for the better by forsaking things that are merely lawful and pursuing those that are helpful. For that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed."^[xiii]

"In the second class are those who do not desire vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5:40), to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their own cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of God, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture, therefore, they are called "fatherless," "widows," "desolate"; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their "Father" and "Judge" [Ps. 68:5^[xiv]]. Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also.... Therefore those in the second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved (Matt. 5:44^[xv]). This is the gospel and the example of Christ (Luke 23:34^[xvi])."^[xvii]

"In the third class are those who in persuasion are like

the second type just mentioned, but they are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. These are called 'zealots' and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice."^[xviii]

M. Hoy □ October 2014

[i] LW 31:293-306. Thought to be based on a Palm Sunday sermon preached by Luther in 1519.

[ii] LW 31:297. Italics mine. Cf. Luther's first of the *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517): "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of *repentance*." LW 31:25. Italics mine.

[iii] LW 31:298. The basis of Luther's "happy exchange" (*die froehliche Wechsel*).

[iv] LW 31:299.

[v] LW 31:299-300.

[vi] LW 31:300.

[vii] "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

[viii] LW 31:302.

[ix] LW 31:303.

[x] LW 31:303-304.

[xi] LW 31:305. Italics mine.

[xii] Specifically here, Luther notes two passages from 2 Corinthians 6: “All things are lawful for me, but not all this are helpful;” (v. 12) and “To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you” (v. 7).

[xiii] LW 31:305.

[xiv] “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”

[xv] “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

[xvi] “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

[xvii] LW 31:305-306.

[xviii] LW 31:306. Luther provides two Scriptural illustrations: that of Christ and the whip of cords in the temple (John 2:14-17); and Paul’s admonition, “Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness” (1 Cor. 4:21).

“Fail, for Christ’s sake!” A Dose of Luther for Lent, 2015

Colleagues,

I don’t mean to confuse you. When you get to today’s offering, you’ll see immediately that it was keyed to last year’s celebration of the Reformation. Why then the “Lent” of the title above? Answer #1: because it is Lent. Answer #2: because

the essay you'll be reading revolves around Philippians 2:5ff, the classic Epistle for Palm Sunday. Today's writer, Mike Hoy, will give us a distilled version of Martin Luther's exposition of the passage in a sermon he preached on that day in 1519. Mike's aim, of course, is to get us thinking about the timeliness and urgency of Luther's insights for our circumstances today, and that he'll do. I suspect this will be the first time that any of us have been urged so directly to aim for failing grades. No, let me correct that: it will be the first time we've noticed in quite this way that our Lord has been urging failure on us all along. See, for example, the Gospel text for this coming Second Sunday in Lent ([Mark 8:31-38](#); Year B, Revised Common Lectionary).

By the way, if you've been following Crossings posts for any length of time, Mike will need no introduction. [Our website](#) is graced with a heap of his solid work, and if you've purchased either of Bob Bertam's posthumously published books, you'll have noticed that Mike was the editor. It's good to hear from him again in Thursday Theology.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Righteousness as Losing—getting all “Fs” for the sake of the Gospel

Some reflections for Reformation 2014

2017 will mark the 500th year of the Reformation, traced back to Luther's Ninety Five Theses. Several commemorations are already going on, especially in Europe, where they are in their seventh year leading up to this celebration.

How, in 2014, should the church be *ecclesia semper*

reformanda [i.e. the church undergoing constant reformation-*ed.*]? A few months ago I was trying to track down the source of some profound insights that speak to the church as one in missional engagement, finally finding them (Aha!) in Luther's sermon on "The Two Kinds of Righteousness" (1519—believed to have been his Palm Sunday sermon). I have provided you with the "cliff notes" of that sermon in the pages that follow, shortening his 10 pages down to 3 (see below, *Ecclesia semper reformanda 2014: Revisiting Luther's "Two Kinds of Righteousness"*). I hope these may prove useful in further reflection. What I have for today are five themes that may provide us some insight for Reformation 2014.

The overall theme is seeing how righteousness comes by losing, not by winning. It applies to Christ himself, based on theme of Philippians 2 (NRSV; regarded by many as an early Christian hymn, and the epistle reading in the Church's lectionary for both Palm Sunday and again recently on Lectionary 26, Sept. 25-Oct. 1, Year A!):

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
as something to be exploited [Luther: grasped],
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave [Luther: servant; and here Luther's
text ends, but we continue],
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.
[Then the upswing; but that is not as significant to Luther's
exposition here, because the emphasis is on how we lose with
Christ crucified]

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The emphasis we may take from Luther and the Reformation for this year is how we can see (for Christ and ourselves) how righteousness is losing—getting all F's for the sake of the gospel.

1. **Fröhliche Wechsel: How Christ became re-Formed for us** The first F is for “Fröhliche Wechsel,” which translated from the original German means “happy exchange” (or “blessed exchange;” Bob Bertram used to call it the “Sweet Swap”). We start with this because it is the basis of the most significant kind of righteousness that makes us whole—the alien (to us) righteousness that comes from Christ to us, a righteousness we cannot attain or achieve on our own. It is how Christ takes from us what we have coming to us—our sin, our weakness, our death, our most grievous faults—and gives to us instead what he has coming to the One who is (per Paul to the Philippians) in the “form of God.” That was not the “form” he chose for us. That “form” he gave up in order to take on another “form”—the form of a servant, a slave, an obedient child, even to the point of death on a cross. Why? Because that is where we are, by virtue also of an evil that comes to us from without, but also within, from birth as children of the first Adam—our original sin. This was an important theme in the Reformation of the early 1500s. The teaching of the church at that time (and

today?) was that we needed to clean up our acts with regard to all our “actual sins,” and neglected the core root of our “original sin” from which all actual sins proceed as fruit. One will notice that when Luther speaks of the two kinds of righteousness, he considers both of them Christian—the second righteousness being our fruits of the alien righteousness in good works for the sake of others (which is, of course, juxtaposed to the problem of our actual sins). But the exchange of Christ for us is to overcome the darkness of our sin; and from that exchange, any and all good works proceed.

It is important to note here that the Reformers did not neglect the teaching about good works. That was never their intent, though we have often neglected them in our un-Reformation-like teaching sometimes about justification, as if good works were inherently evil. Not so. Not for Luther, nor for the other confessors of that era. But without the “happy exchange,” anything we might venture as works of our own are meaningless and fruitless. So that is why we need to grasp this first F—that Christ grasped has grasped us, and did it freely and willingly.

At the heart of Luther’s gospel in this sermon is this message:

“The ‘form of God’ is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness—and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject. He was pre-eminent in such attributes as are particularly proper to the form of God. Yet he was not haughty in that form; he did not please himself (Rom. 15:3); nor did he disdain and despise those who were enslaved and subjected to various evils. He was not like the Pharisee who said, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men’ (Luke 18:11), for that man was

delighted that others were wretched; at any rate he was unwilling that they should be like him. This is the type of robbery by which a man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God's, nor does he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God, sufficient in themselves, pleasing themselves, glorying in themselves, under obligation to no one, and so on. Not thus, however, did Christ think; not of this stamp was his wisdom. He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied himself, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils. And although he was free, as the Apostle also says of himself also (1 Cor. 9:19), he made himself servant of all (Mark 9:35), living as if all the evils which were ours were actually his own." (LW 31:301)

2. **Failings, admitted penitently** The second F is for Failings, admitted penitently. The first thesis of the Reformation squares this up as the most central understanding of what it means to be a Christian—that we repent. "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of *repentance*." (LW 31:25)

Thus in this righteousness we have from Christ, it is part and parcel of our being via baptism that we live that righteousness "whenever [we] are truly *repentant*." (LW 31:297) Confessing our sins is not the only confessing we do, but it is the first one that understands that any righteousness we have is not going to come from us, our works, our indulgences, or anything else we contrive.

Today, we have a lot of failings to admit, not the least of which is that we are dying. (In another piece I am working on, I will note the overarching truth of our culture—that is a culture of despair, which is the same as saying a culture that is unwilling and perhaps unable to accept the truth of its death.) The fact that we are dying is not the deepest truth, however. Even in faithfulness, you will die. But you can also die unfaithfully; and that is the greater evil.

Whom we have failed is a whole multitude. Luther speaks of all who are “unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we,” “the poor, the orphans, and the widows” as “the neighbor.” (LW 31:304, 306) We have failed that neighbor in grasping our own sense of righteousness over against this very same neighbor, even in boasting of ourselves as righteous while denying this neighbor. Might the list of neighbor-denying get murkier? When we castigate gays and lesbians (as, it seems, will still be the mantra for Catholicism in the immediate future, but also among many mainliners and conservative religious movements)? When we do not understand why it is that the “nones” make no claim to religious preference? When we say we are open to all but cannot seem to break down the walls and barriers of our own ethnic pride? When we in the church dismiss one another and develop a reputation of exiling and shooting our wounded, even among our own professionals? Might all of these, and many more examples, point to how we have missed our “neighbor” whom we have explicitly denied because we have not seen *failing* for them as a good thing? Notice how also this failing extends to those public individuals who are those placed into responsible offices “to punish and judge evil men [and why?], to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who

does this. They are his servants in this very matter." (LW 31:305) I have met many such public individuals who did not understand their office as connected with the least of these, and even have a few of my own sins to confess in this regard as a public individual in the church. But also, among the private individuals, even these "seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a great number." Yet they cannot see how they are denying the very basis of a hope that unites them with their neighbor. Justice is only understood as "*my justice*"—never mind the neighbor!

Which leads us to the next F.

3. **Form of servants; our being re-Formed for others** Maybe at the heart of the Re-formation is understanding and grasping by faith our need to be re-Formed for others, even as Christ was re-Formed for us. As Luther explicates this, we, like Christ, have the same mind when we take on this form of a servant and give up the form of God to which we so often want to grasp. In keeping with the Philippians text, "The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in accordance with the example of Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the 'form of God,' so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it (II Cor. 6:10—'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'), as one of those who lack it. Paul's meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God's gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor's weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own." (LW 31:302)

Taking on the other “form”—that of the servant—is to place oneself beneath the other for the sake of the other. I admit it would be difficult for any of us to have that spirit of Re-form-ation, apart from the life our Lord lived for us and lives for us still. Luther also seemed to think so. Notice his commentary on the story of Simon and the woman who weeps, anoints, and wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair. Which of these has succeeded, and which had failed? “In like manner he [Christ] will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor’s shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor’s. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but that of another.... It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor’s condition were better than its own, and if its

neighbor's condition is better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better." (LW 31:303-304) As Luther would go on to say, "that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed." (LW 31:305) I have no doubt that it will.

But the truly vibrant, living form is that of being the servant of others. It means taking what gifts we have and understanding that these "forms of God" that we so dearly cling to are not meant to be held on to, but given away, freely, as Christ gave freely for us. ¶I have been for a long time now a proponent of missional church. It was a strong accent of my most recent parish ministry. It engaged me and our congregational community with the greater city community in which we were rooted. Are we willing to be a church without walls, taking on the form of those who are around us, embracing them, even celebrating their gifts and seeing these "neighbors" as our partners in ministry. This re-forming is a form of dying, to be sure. But it is a dying with Christ.

4. **Forgiveness**The fourth F is forgiveness.

"In the second class are those who do not desire vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5:40), to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their own cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of god, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture therefore they are called 'fatherless,' 'widows,' 'desolate'; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their 'Father' and 'Judge' (Ps. 68:5—'Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.'). Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or

seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also... Therefore those in this second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved (Matt. 5:44—'But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'). This is the gospel and the example of Christ (Luke 23:34—'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.').” (LW 31:305-306)

“In the third class are those who in persuasion are like the second type just mentioned, but they are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. These are called ‘zealots’ and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice.” (LW 31:306)

Both of these classes, as Luther lifts them up here, remind me of themes I have noted in Desmond Tutu, who said, “without forgiveness, there is no future.” Tutu,

also (and like Martin Luther King) understood the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice. Few make that distinction, though I find also those glimpses of it even in Luther who noted the proper role of public individuals. The forgiveness that was practiced in South Africa liberated the oppressors by forgiving them, granting them amnesty.

Are we that forgiving?

5. **Ferguson: a test case**As we think of another F—and by the way, I think also a time of crisis, and maybe even a time for confessing—there is the one that is closest to home for us: Ferguson, Missouri.

My own experience of Ferguson was seeing what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil” where a public official follows orders without recognizing that maybe there is something inherently evil about those orders. I see a police officer who followed protocol and training, and a young man left shot to death in the streets. I weep over this. Some, and many among authorities, have tried to justify the incident; but there is no justification for this.

Instead, I would have us look back on the prior “F’s” and see if they give us some clue as to how we might rethink all of what Ferguson represents as the glaring “F” of our time. So in the questions that follow, please keep in mind that this is all preliminary, but I hope helpful:

What does it mean for us to truly understand that our Lord placed himself in the midst of those very lives which have been most ravaged by sin—which includes the deadly sin of racism and its effects—even dying with criminals and outcasts, making the harsh truth of their (our) lives his,

and his life theirs (ours)?

How do we admit our failings in overcoming white privilege, pride, power, and experiences that cannot even begin to truly comprehend what is really going on in the hearts and minds and lives of others who do not have that privilege, pride, power, and experience?

How might taking the form of a servant be placing the least of these above our own lives, even embracing them as partners with us in ministry for the good of the whole world?

How can we treasure again that we are people who are nothing ourselves without forgiveness; and in welcoming that forgiveness, might we become then a people of that forgiveness for others?

Ecclesia semper reformanda 2014: Revisiting Luther's "Two Kinds of Righteousness"^[i]

The fuller text that is the basis of Luther's reflection: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." (Phil. 2:5-7]

"There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds.

"The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without... This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly *repentant*."^[ii] "Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our

righteousness and all that he has becomes ours....”^[iii] This first righteousness is juxtaposed to our original sin, “likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone.”^[iv]

The second kind of righteousness: “our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is the manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self.... In the second place, this righteousness consists in love to one’s neighbor, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God.... This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence....”^[v] This second type of righteousness is “set opposite to our own actual sin.”^[vi]

Luther then goes into a lengthy exposition of the text of Philippians 2, concluding with this point: “The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in accordance with the example of Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the ‘form of God,’ so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it (II Cor. 6:10^[vii]), as one of those who lack it. Paul’s meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God’s gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor’s weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own.”^[viii] Luther then examines further a corollary text in Luke 7:36-50 (Simon the Pharisee, whom Luther calls Simon the leper, and the woman

who anointed Jesus' feet, whom Luther calls Mary Magdalene). "Simon the leper is now nothing but a sinner. He who seemed to himself so righteous sits divested of the glory of the form of God, humiliated in the form of a servant, willy-nilly. On the other hand, Christ honors Mary with the form of God and elevates her above Simon.... How great were the merits which neither she nor Simon saw. Her faults are remembered no more. Christ ignored the form of servitude in her whom he has exalted with the form of sovereignty. Mary is nothing but righteous, elevated into the glory of the form of God..."^[ix]

"In like manner he [Christ] will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor's shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor's. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but

that of another.... It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor's condition were better than its own, and if its neighbor's condition is better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better."^[x]

Luther then turns to the question of proper chastisement of evil (contra lawlessness) by classifying people into two groups: public and private individuals.

Public individuals are those placed into responsible offices *"to punish and judge evil men, to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who does this. They are his servants in this very matter...."*^[xi]

Private individuals are classified in three kinds.

"First, there are those who seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a great number. Paul tolerates such people, but he does not approve of them^[xii].... Nevertheless such will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they have changed for the better by forsaking things that are merely lawful and pursuing those that are helpful. For that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed."^[xiii]

"In the second class are those who do not desire vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5:40), to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their own cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of God, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture, therefore, they are called "fatherless,"

“widows,” “desolate”; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their “Father” and “Judge” [Ps. 68:5^[xiv]). Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also... Therefore those in the second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved (Matt. 5:44^[xv]). This is the gospel and the example of Christ (Luke 23:34^[xvi]).”^[xvii]

“In the third class are those who in persuasion are like the second type just mentioned, but they are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. These are called ‘zealots’ and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice.”^[xviii]

[i] LW 31:293-306. Thought to be based on a Palm Sunday sermon preached by Luther in 1519.

[ii] LW 31:297. Italics mine. Cf. Luther's first of the *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517): "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of *repentance*." LW 31:25. Italics mine.

[iii] LW 31:298. The basis of Luther's "happy exchange" (*die froehliche Wechsel*).

[iv] LW 31:299.

[v] LW 31:299-300.

[vi] LW 31:300.

[vii] "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

[viii] LW 31:302.

[ix] LW 31:303.

[x] LW 31:303-304.

[xi] LW 31:305. Italics mine.

[xii] Specifically here, Luther notes two passages from 2 Corinthians 6: "All things are lawful for me, but not all this are helpful;" (v. 12) and "To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you" (v. 7).

[xiii] LW 31:305.

[xiv] "Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation."

[xv] "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

[xvi] "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are

doing.”

[xvii] LW 31:305-306.

[xviii] LW 31:306. Luther provides two Scriptural illustrations: that of Christ and the whip of cords in the temple (John 2:14-17); and Paul’s admonition, “Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness” (1 Cor. 4:21).

Unearthing Gospel Gold—the Essay, Part II

Colleagues,

Here’s the continuation of the essay that we launched you into [last week](#). It was delivered by the undersigned at last month’s Crossings Seminar in Belleville, Illinois. As I write this, ill winds from the north have their icy claws on a major hunk of the U.S., including northeastern Ohio, the corner I’m tucked away in. A fanciful thought (though time was when it wasn’t): might the Almighty be reminding a nation of the message that far too many tried dodging yesterday when they skipped Ash Wednesday services? If so, his final aim, as seen in Easter light, can only be to drive us all into the warm embrace of Christ. Whatever it takes...

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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

—continued

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." "The Word of the Lord," says the preacher, having read that far, only the Lord's Word doesn't stop there. Now the prophet lays out what he's being sent to do, and it isn't at all nice. "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' 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.

+ + +

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 *euangelion* 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 in 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 you 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.

+ + +

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 my law within them, and write it on their hearts," Jeremiah 31:33. (By contrast, see the "you-do-it!" imperatives of Deuteronomy 4:6-8.)

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 admiring yourself for having earned it—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—the Essay, Part I

Colleagues,

We’ve been away, though not loafing. My co-editor, Carol Braun, was busy serving the Lord last week by bringing her first child into the Lord’s world. Solomon Porter Zimansky was born on February 7. Mother and son are both well, God be praised. Carol is presently on maternity leave, also from Thursday Theology.

As for me, I’ve been busy first with preps for last month’s Crossings seminar (see below), then with the seminar itself, then with the catch-up work that was waiting when I got back to

the congregation I serve in Fairview Park, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. I can name some remarkable people who would handle this and Thursday Theology without breaking a sweat, but I'm not one of them. This leaves me inevitably in debt to all of you for your patience. It's been almost a month since the last post. I hope to put together another weekly string that will take you up to Holy Week. Expect another hiatus when that gets here.

This week's offering is the first section of an essay I delivered on the opening night of the recent seminar, the boosting of which was the subject of our last post. Since the writing of this kept me from refreshing your inboxes a couple of weeks ago, let me share it with you now, with part two following next week. The full, unbroken version will appear at some point on the Crossings website, along with a few other seminar presentations. Look under the Library tab, then click "Conference Papers," then "2015 papers" at such time as the latter link appears.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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
Sunday, January 25, 7:00 p.m.

by Jerome Burce, D. Min.

+ + +

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?

+ + +

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."

+ + +

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 lightening 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.

+ + +

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.

—to be continued.

The Legend of Lambeau: The Sacred Space and Religious Ritual of Professional Football

Crossings Seminar
Monday, January 26, 2015
By Steven E. Albertin

This is the last week before the Super Bowl. What began as the NFL-AFL Championship game in 1967, a game for which 40,000 tickets went unsold, has mushroomed 48 years later into a huge cultural event that has almost become a national holiday. The size of the event has grown along with the size of the NFL. The hysteria and hype have so ballooned that the Super Bowl TV commercials have become an art form. Cities will spend hundreds of millions of dollars to build stadiums hoping that then they will get to host a Super Bowl.

The growth of the Super Bowl has paralleled the growth in the popularity of football across our society on all levels of

competition. For many, football has taken on the trappings of religion. It has sacred spaces, symbols and rituals that function just like the sacred spaces, symbols and rituals of traditional religion. Bill White will shortly give you his analysis of the fanatical growth of college football in the American South especially in the SEC, The Southeastern Conference. He will use the Crossings Method to show what God is doing to fans in college football through God's Law and then show how what God does through the Gospel offers a different way of being a football fan. I am going to do the same kind of analysis but on professional football and especially on the Green Bay Packers. I will utilize a Video that was made 12 years ago by Packers to celebrate the completion of the newly renovated and expanded Lambeau Field.

The video's use of religious language and imagery is stunning. Lambeau Field has become a sacred space where fans come to worship not just the Packers but a story, tradition and history that is bigger than life. The Packers are something that gives meaning and purpose to people who want something to believe. Some of the rituals seem silly. Fans will even laugh about them. Just look at the silly hats and costumes. However, deep down I sense that there is something much more going on here than just fun.

Here is one example. This is Saint Vince of Lambeau Field. For many years he has attended the games, walked around the stadium greeting fans and posed for pictures dressed like some green and gold Packer Bishop, a religious leader in the Cathedral of Lambeau. Complete with a chasuble, a miter with the picture of Vince Lombardi, a cheese head on his bishop's crosier and all the championship years listed on his stole, he would walk around the stadium and have admirers kiss his bishop's ring. It seemed to be all in jest but I suspect that his popularity reflected the religious longings that lurked deep in the hearts of many

Packer fans. They know that Lambeau Field is not actually a church. They know that it is only a game. They know that whether the Packers win or lose does not affect the meaning of life. However, secretly, deep in their hearts, many wish it did. They long to belong to something that is bigger than their individual lives. In a world where everything is in constant change and flux, the Packer tradition embodied in the Legend of Lambeau is something that transcends the march of time. By reliving, the great games of the past and retelling the stories of the great players in the Ring of Fame, a fan “communes” with the Legend and becomes part of the unique and sacred tradition that will endure long after they are in the grave.

Football is only supposed to be a game and not a matter of life and death. However, you would never guess it from the huge depression many Packer fans went into this past week after the colossal and historic collapse of the Packers in the NFC Championship game against Seattle. (I won't rehearse the painful details.) As they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, tempers erupted. Talk radio and social media were filled with profanities as angry fans wanted to fire the coach and the players. Some wanted to do things far worse. Many felt betrayed and wanted their pound of flesh. The Packer's loss was not the end of the world . . . but for many it might just as well have been. For many the colossal collapse was of Biblical proportions. It will live on for years, perhaps even decades, in the memories of disappointed fans, as they continue to rehearse the pain and disappointment just as Israel did for centuries after the colossal collapse of the Babylonian captivity.

But I am getting ahead of myself here. We need to watch the video, “The Legend of Lambeau Field.” I have selected several excerpts from the video that are especially illustrative of the religious dimension of football. For those of you who are knowledgeable, you will see that the video is a little dated.

Brett Favre is still the quarterback. Aaron Rodgers is still in junior college. Even though a decade has past, the Legend, with another recent renovation and expansion of “the frozen tundra,” has only grown.

(Watch video)

Did you notice all of the religious language and imagery? Let me sight some examples. Lambeau Field is a “shrine” to be “revered.” The “legend” is renewed with by retelling the stories of great players and great games that took place in this “sacred place.” It is a “sacred place” because it reflects a tradition that is older than the NFL itself. It is a “monument” built on the “bedrock” of the great players and teams of the past. As we saw the grainy black and white film clips of the great players from a distant past, when the players wore leather helmets without facemasks and shoulder pads were barely visible, we caught a glimpse of a mythical time when the game was more pure and innocent. It was like a glimpse into the Garden of Eden before the Fall of football into the greedy hands of big business, selfish owners and corporate America. Lambeau Field and its team are monuments to an idyllic past, a time of lost innocence when men played for almost nothing, purely out of love for the game.

Lambeau and its Norman Rockwell setting in the small town of Green Bay remind of us a simpler time when kids tossed a football in the streets and you knew who your neighbors were. As the only professional team in American owned by its fans, the fans express their almost religious commitment by purchasing stock that pays no dividends. Talk about true believers!

The “frozen tundra of Lambeau Field” is “hallowed ground” where the sacred stories are retold and relived. You see the names of holy men like the saints of the church displayed in the “ring of

fame" on the inside of the stadium. Outside the stadium stand huge bronze statues in the likeness of two the greatest heroes of the Packer tradition, Curly Lambeau and Vince Lombardi. They might as well be Saints Peter and Paul at the Vatican in Rome. When true fans go to a game, they make a "pilgrimage" to what most Packer fans would reverentially call the "holy land." When you go, you go to something that is bigger than you are. You go not just to a game but an "event." One of the fans in the video even compares it to going to church on Sunday. He was being more truthful than he may have realized. Notice how fans (worshippers?) gather in the parking lot to tailgate and commune with their fellow believers, eat sacred foods like brats and cheese and drink sacred beverages which in Wisconsin means beer. You listen to the sacred music . . . of the oompah band. One passionate disciple in the video even said that to tailgate in the "shadow of the shrine" is "mythical." Another brags that he has lived his whole life in the shadow of Lambeau as if it was Jerusalem or the Mount of Olives.

Going to Lambeau means that you get to be a part of sacred traditions and rituals that recall sacred events of the past. There is the Lambeau Leap. There is that cute training camp tradition when players adopt kids and ride their bikes to and from practice. Seeing those kids interact with their heroes is enough to make tears come to your eyes. Women used to wear hats to church. That was the proper way to show your respect. Here the fans wear cheeseheads and seek the blessing of St. Vince as he walks around the stadium greeting his congregants.

These are only some of the more visible religious symbols in the video. If you ever visit Lambeau, you will go to what is the finest Hall of Fame and museum of any team in the NFL. It is like a trip to the Holy Land. In this sacred place, games are relived. The accomplishments of players like saints of the past are reverently retold. Holy relics, today we call them sports

memorabilia, are displayed with a sense of holy awe. For a fan it is a way to be a part of something that is transcendent, bigger than you, beyond time and space, eternal, even divine.

How do we make sense out of all of this? How can we bring Christ to this world of professional football. This conference is all about the Crossings Method. The Crossings Method is not only a tool to read and interpret Scripture theologically. The Crossings Method can also be a tool to read our culture theologically. Through the six step method, I will examine “The Legend of Lambeau.” How do we see God’s Law at work in this video and the culture of professional football it portrays, especially the Green Bay Packers? How can the Gospel of Jesus Christ speak the good news to this culture and make possible a different way of being a football fan?

Diagnosis: Lambeau – Just A Legend

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – A Laundered Legend

“The Legend of Lambeau” portrays a legendary football stadium and team that is like no other. The legend of Lambeau is mythic and foundational for the Packers and the NFL. However, the informed viewer will soon discover a problem. The myth does not match reality. The Legend has been laundered. The historical facts do not always mesh with the sacred story. The embarrassing facts that might taint the legend are conveniently ignored. (Cf. the David Maraniss biography – “When Pride Still Mattered, The Biography of Vince Lombardi”) A few examples:

- a) The won/loss record: no mention is made of the embarrassing years in the wilderness. First it was the 1950’s, a decade without a winning season. Then, it may not have been

40 years in the wilderness but it was almost 30 between Super Bowl appearances. The Packers had a terrible string of simply awful teams in the 70's, 80's and early 90's. Green Bay was literally called the gulag of the NFL. Playing in Green Bay was like being sent to Siberia. No one wanted to play there. During this time even the sainted Bart Starr was fired as coach because he lost so many games.

b) Attendance: yes 43 now 54 years of “sellouts” and a waiting list of 81,000 for season tickets for an average wait of 30 years. But during those 30 years in the wilderness there were many empty seats in Lambeau. Tickets may have been sold but many did not want to waste their time on a Legend that was less than legendary.

c) Flawed saints: Saints “Peter and Paul” i.e., Lambeau and Lombardi, stand in bigger than life bronze statues outside the stadium. However, they both walked away from the Legend of Lambeau. Curly Lambeau was literally run out of town and Lombardi went to the Redskins and back to his East Coast friends tired of Green Bay. Tittletown, which had long prided itself in its Midwestern, small town way life, felt betrayed.

d) Kids and bikes: Super Bowl Coach, Mike Holmgren, tells in the video how The Legend disappointed the worshipful kids when their player gets “cut” from the team. Their faces flooded with tears.

e) Much of the Lambeau renovation and expansion was publicly funded through a tax increase. The voters had to approve it. Many opposed it. It was a long and bitter struggle. The referendum barely passed. The Legend did not captivate everyone's wallet.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – A Disappointing Legend

Humans are incurably theolatrous. We must have our gods, a

reason to get out bed in the morning, something in which to invest our hearts our time, talent and treasure . . . something to fear, love and trust above all else. We long for a Legend, a sacred story, tradition, hero or drama that makes us feel good, that sustains us through thick and thin, for rituals and traditions that connect us to a Legend that endures. “The Legend of Lambeau” is filled such religious impulses. (see analysis above).

However, idolatry doesn’t work. When we try to make the creature into the Creator, we will be disappointed. A false god is a false god. We do not want to face this truth. The video fails to be more honest and truthful about the cracks in the Legend, because the believers are afraid to admit the truth. Afraid that the Legend may not be what it is cracked up to be, they are determined to perpetuating a myth.

A member of my congregation is a dedicated Packer fan. His wife reported to me a few days ago with a sense of humor and worry that her husband was so upset by the colossal collapse in Seattle that he could not sleep for days. Sounds like someone with misplaced faith, a heart longing for a Legend to believe in, someone who is disappointed by an idol that let him down. Such stories and disappointments are not unique to Packer fans.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – A Legend Lost

“The Legend of Lambeau” video is so optimistic, reverential and laundered (almost to the point of being comic) because it fears what lurks in the darkness. No one wants to admit it. No one wants to face it . . . because we are afraid that it actually is true . . . which of course . . . it is. This Legend has no transcendent authorization. It is like the fairy-tale we tell to

our children so that they won't be afraid of the dark. However, the darkness is real. The Legend has clay feet. We do have reason to be afraid, because someone is coming to smash our idols. We have invented a Legend and tried to make it look holy. However, like an idol made out of stone and silver, it can do nothing to save us from the One who is really in charge and calls all the shots. One day this One will decide to call in his chips. We are in trouble.

Prognosis: Calvary – THE Legend

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – THE Lasting Legend

Of course, one should never expect “The Legend of Lambeau” to be anything else. It is the fruit of Packer marketing and propaganda. Of course, it is religious hype. It is our job to sort out the truth from the hype. That is what the church does. The church has THE Legend/ story/ narrative/ tradition that lasts, endures and tells the truth. It focuses on another sacred place that offers not a laundered story but an uncensored account of the truth. It tells a story that climaxes not on the gridiron with thousands cheering but at the place which for Packer fans is even worse than the colossal collapse in Seattle. At the heart of this story is a public execution of the Son of God. Its story launders nothing. It includes all the warts and blemishes that mark real life. There are disciples who abandon and deny their coach. Their leader wins no trophy but dies on a cross. Instead of a loyal fan club they are fickle followers who in the end turn on their leader. No one offers this hero a bike ride. Instead, former admirers now enemies demand his blood. Civic leaders would never think of seeking public funding to support him.

This is the story that the church tells. It is the anti-legend Legend. It does not promote the virtues that must be practiced to win. Instead, it offers the virtuous One who gives away his life for the fans who no longer want to go the game, only want to scalp their tickets, get their money back and do what they want to do with their money and lives. Of course, God who has every right in the world to get back and get even with those who have so abused him. BUT amazingly, God chooses not to.

We have foolishly laundered our legends and propped up our idols. We have thumbed our noses at God. We deserve to get cut. Instead, God suffers for us on the cross. Instead, God takes our dirt and makes us clean. God launders what we could never hope to launder. This is the Legend that lasts when others fail. This the Legend that not only give what others cannot but also does it freely and graciously to those who do not deserve it. God raises Jesus from the dead confirming that not even death can discredit this Legend.

That is legendary!

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Trusting on THE Legend

Here is the only Legend in which fans can trust. This is the Legend that truly transcends the tarnished and laundered traditions of the Packers or whatever our team happens to be. Here fans will never be betrayed because here is a Legend that never stops giving. This legendary coach will never walk away to another team. Fans, which have always been searching for something and someone they can trust, at last have a god they can count on. In Jesus Christ the frantic search for a legend, team, or god who will not disappointed at last comes to an end.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Living THE Legend

Chad Gibbs in “God and Football” writes, “Football is a great hobby, but a horrible God.” When this is the legend that shapes our lives this is how we get to live. We can enjoy the game and our team like a good glass of wine. We can savor the taste in the moment and need do no more. We do not have to live for it. We do not have to die for it. The losses will not crush us. The victories will not fool us. We can relax and enjoy the game instead of letting it be what makes . . . or ruins our day. We can honestly talk about our football legends. We do not have to launder them and pretend that they are something they are not.

Remember the St. Vince . . . the tailgaters, silly costumes, the over-the-top sacred language, the bombastic tones of “the frozen tundra”? Now we can snicker at the silliness and enjoy the jokes. They are not desperate attempts to make football bigger than what it is. Rather, they are the playful ways we can poke fun of the Legendary pretensions of the Lambeau Field or whatever our team might be. We know in our hearts that they are not actually the Legends that their bombast proclaims. We do not need to take them so seriously. It is just a joke. It is just fun. It is just a game. We can dress up goofy costumes, act silly and have some fun. We won’t take this seriously if you don’t.

And don’t fret about a colossal collapse in Seattle or think you have died and gone to heaven because your team won the Super Bowl. Just go to bed. Have a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow is another day to enjoy. What did Luther say, plant an apple tree? When we are living in the legend of Jesus, we can let football be football . . . and let God be God.

[TheLegendofLambeau \(PDF\)](#)

Candice's Presentation – January 2015

When Cathy Lessman asked me if I would be a presenter for this conference, my initial reaction was that I am not qualified! I only graduated from seminary in 2013 and I am only 6 months into my first call as Associate pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in O'Fallon. I'm just a baby in this field. And anytime I feel like a baby, I get a bit insecure because I'm reminded of my position as the baby of my family. Is anyone here baby of their family? Then you know what I mean, right? How many pictures are there of your older siblings? And how many of there are of you? Exactly. There are literally dozens of pics of my sister and brother and maybe one of me in a diaper. So it's hard to be the baby, you feel a little insecure.

There's a joke I like to guilt my parents with- every new parent gets a baby swing. When I was little, they had the hand crank. Well, with the first child you never use the swing because you just wanna stare into their face while you rock them sleep. With the second baby, you still rock them to sleep, but every now and then you use the swing so you can help your first child with the potty or something. By the third child, you've taught your oldest how to rewind the swing to keep the baby quiet, while you beg the middle child to take a nap.

At any rate, Cathy asked me, and actually I'm getting to a point in life where there fewer and fewer opportunities for me to feel like the baby, so I thought why not, I'll share what I got. I'm going to talk to you today about how my journey to the Crossings community, how I have tailored the methodology around my style,

and then I'll wrap up by talking about some of the challenges that I've encountered trying to preach Christ crucified.

By now you've heard the Crossings Community is committed to the proper use of the Law/Gospel distinction. As a young girl growing up in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, I can tell you I am familiar with the Law part. I can say that with some affection as my childhood in the LCMS was a blessed one, I was surrounded by a loving community. Taught by a series of grandmotherly Sunday School teachers the stories of our faith ancestors, father Abraham and his many sons, the cautionary tales of Noah and Jonah. Summers spent in Vacation Bible School learning songs about Zacchaeus, the wee little man and Jesus Loves Me. I went through confirmation and memorized the commandments, the creeds, the Lord's Prayer. And I fell in love with the church.

But my brother didn't. You see, my grandparents are the ones who took us to church, my parents never attended. A point our pastor would try at times to impress upon us kids, hoping it would make it's way back to our parents. My brother felt the weight of that pressure and one time, it went too far for him. At confirmation class one Wednesday evening the lesson was the sixth commandment. Our pastor looked right at my brother and said very clearly, "If you have premarital sex, you will go to hell." And my brother immediately thought of our parents. Both just 16 years old when mom fell pregnant with our sister. Of course, they would get married and remain so today. But what my brother heard was that these lovely people, who he adored, a mother who cooked his favorite chicken casserole, a father who taught him how to fish and ride a bike, were going to hell for a mistake they make as teenagers not much older than him. And he was done. Done with the church. Done with faith. Done with the Law proclaimed there.

That's the problem with the Law and no Gospel. I can argue now as an adult whether or not our pastor was even interpreting the Law appropriately. But as a child, I just accepted it. I didn't feel the repulsion that my brother did, I simply felt the expectation. And being the industrious child I was and still really am, I thought I could rise to that expectation. I was a bit of a church star. I won every verse memorization contest. I strove for every attendance sticker. If God had standards, I would simply meet them. Don't you love the naivety of youth? It lasted a good long while. Into my mid twenties.

Though I don't know that I could articulate it at the time, I had a growing false confidence that striving toward Law fulfillment can give you. It's like that cruel "science experiment" with the frog in a cold pot of water on the stove. If you raise the temperature slowly, the frog won't perceive it's getting too hot and jump out. Eventually, you can get the pot boiling and the poor frog with it. That's the Law, or at least that was what the Law, unrelieved by the Gospel, was doing to me. I became one of those Christians who had an answer to every moral and ethical question and a finger to point at everyone who wasn't measuring up. In my hands, the Law became weaponized morality. All the while, I was just raising the temperature of the pot of water I was sitting in. Deep down I knew I didn't measure up either, I was just papering over my own shortcomings though, using some of those helpful coping skills like denial and projection and rationalization. And my faith world was shrinking. That's what happens when everyone you encounter must measure up to the application of the Law as Gospel. We need only look to the New Testament Pharisees and their tiny circles of truly "holy" people to see how small the world can get.

Anyway, I won't bore you with the sad details of how the weight of my own judgment started to unravel my faith. I'll save that

for Oprah. It just did. I was a young wife and mother at 22, living in Montana far away from my family and supporting my husband's new career as a Air Force officer and the weight of my faith was crippling me with condemnation along with the other parts of my life that weren't going so well. I can remember quietly weeping in the pew on Sunday because I just wasn't good enough anywhere.

Into that mess, walked my dear mother-in-law, Rev. Christina Seibel, who is not unknown to some of you in the Crossings Community. Chris lived in this area in the late 90's when she made the decision to go to seminary. Through her pastor, Rev. Buzz, she found her way to the Lutheran School of the Theology in St. Louis and met her first professor, Bob Bertram- the much beloved and profoundly gifted theologian, pastor, and co-founder of this community. Now to say that my mother-in-law adored Bob Bertram is putting it lightly. She had three pictures in her first parish office, one of her children, one of her grandchildren, and one of her and Bob. She took a few classes with Bob, as many as she could before she transferred to Gettysburg Seminary in Philadelphia, where she graduated with a Master of Divinity.

About that time, she came to visit us in Montana, mostly to see her first grandbaby, my son Garrett. But to see us too. And we talked. And talked. And talked. And I cried and told her my faith wasn't helping me adjust to adult life and all the obstacles and challenges that were coming. That it felt like God would be nothing but disappointed with my terrible failures that were all I could see about myself.

And she shared with me a story about her first class years ago with Bob Bertram, it was only two weeks after she had tragically lost her husband in an accident. And she wasn't sure she should even start class.

And Bob did warn her that this class was on resurrection and it would be hard for her to hear some things. But he also promised he would take the time she needed before and after class to process things with her. So she went. And she loved it, hard as it was to talk about death, it was even more powerful in those difficult weeks to hear the hope of resurrection. But what she wanted to share with me most of all was something she heard from Bertram more than once in that class. And that was this, "The Law drives us to our knees in search of the Gospel."

Now, I know all of you are Lutheran scholars and know your confessions and this line about the Law is probably nothing new. But I had never heard it. All my years of Sunday School, all my years of trying to be who I thought God expected me to be. And I had never heard these simple words. But it described perfectly where I was. I was driven down to the ground, on my knees with a thousand pound anvil on my shoulders. They tell you in pastoral care classes that one of most helpful things you can do for someone is simply to validate what they are feeling. It is absolutely true, and that's what Bertram's words did. They described my condition. It was like seeing myself for the first time. What I saw was a scared little girl terrified of both living imperfectly and the eternal Hell my pastor had condemned my parents to so many years ago. And though it was a sad condition I was in, it clarified in a moment the futility of my efforts to right this ship. It was a blessing.

I wish I could tell you that I heard the Gospel clearly that same day too. I did and I didn't. Somewhere in there my mother-in-law told me about the promise of my baptism and the power of the cross. But it's a funny thing about living in the Law, you tend to want to keep living in it. It is in a strange way comforting, if not habit forming. So I stayed in the Law awhile longer, but at least I understood my condition. And I knew there was strong medicine for it. But hearing the full release of the

Gospel would come a little later and also in the form of a single sentence that spoke perfectly to my condition.

That sentence came about 5 years and one more baby later, my daughter Abigail. And it came right here in Belleville. My still young family was transferred to Scott Air Force Base. Somewhere in that last five years I had discerned the call to seminary, or I should say I uncovered it really, as it had been there since the experience of my baptism at the age of 8. I knew I needed to start by finding a home congregation here and I found St. Mark Lutheran Church, just a few miles down the road.

I was so excited that first Sunday we visited St. Mark because I noticed the Pastor's name was Ron Neustadt and I had just gotten done living in Germany for three years and knew, or thought I knew a little bit of German. So when Pastor Neustadt introduced himself to us, I said, "Oh! Your name means, new street!" To which in his most gentle and kind way, he said, "New city actually, but you know a little German, do you?" And I was hooked on his humble, affable manner and the welcoming people there and found a church home.

Ron Neustadt became a mentor and pastor to me as I started seminary. And I heard the Gospel in his preaching. I heard that I was baptized, that I was a beloved child of God. I was beginning to put the pieces together about this Law/Gospel distinction. And it was just in time really. My husband went through a tough deployment and soon after, we would begin going through a tough divorce. It wasn't long before the little girl who knew the Law started blaming herself for her failures and started hearing God's judgment on a broken marriage.

And then came one Sunday, I'm embarrassed to say I can't even remember the text or rest of the sermon. I just heard Pastor Ron say, "Christ absorbs the critique of God." Again, maybe you've

heard this before. But I hadn't. Or at least the Law was just proclaimed so much louder that I couldn't hear it until just now. And this is why, folks, Bob Bertram's book "A Time for Confessing" is so relevant. I have sat in church pews and listened all my life, I was in seminary for goodness sake! And this was the first time the confession of Christ crucified fell on my open ears. It is why we must preach it every single week. And Ron Neustadt did and it was all I heard. He might have had a great story, with a catchy hook, maybe some great laughs in there too. But all I heard was the Gospel. All I heard was that Christ absorbs the critique I was under. And all I felt was the hand of Christ pulling me up off my knees for the first time. It was just in time. The Good News is always just in time. I have found in the years following this "aha" moment that my once shrunken world has gotten so much larger. With the measuring stick finally seized from my hand, I was able to extend it in love and service- gladly even- toward those I'd closed off.

I told Pastor Ron about that sermon, I emailed him that day. His response was just as many of you who know him would guess it would be, "Well, I had good teachers," he said. Just like him to point away from himself. But he's right. And we share one of those good teachers, the Rev. Dr. Ed Schroeder would become another mentor of mine as I took a few classes through LST during my seminary time. He and Ron would both encourage me to participate in my first Crossing's Conference 5 years ago, which was free to me as a seminary student. And so began my relationship with this community and a deep respect for the Crossings methodology which lends itself so beautifully to seriously addressing the weight of the Law and boldly confessing the Gospel of Christ crucified. Just this week I read Steven Kuhl's treatment of Jesus' call to the disciples in Mark, written in 2006. He has a really clever take on the double meaning of the word crisis in the Chinese language. Did you know

the Chinese character for the word crisis is a combination of two other characters meaning “danger” and “opportunity?” Well you do now thanks to Crossings and Steven Kuhl!

Well that’s my journey to Crossings. Thank you for patiently wading through a short autobiography with me. I’ve reached about the midpoint of my material. And to wake you up a bit, in a moment I’m going to have you turn to your neighbor to talk for a minute about I topic I give you. I’m just kidding. I’m actually a pretty serious introvert and those are the most dreaded words an introvert hears at a presentation. I appreciate all you fellow introverts and promise there will be no talking to neighbors. Let’s just press on. I do want to share with you how I begin my approach to the Crossings method. It’s a little quirky, but I thought it might give you another model to toy with as you develop your own patterns.

Often the hardest thing for me to ferret out in the text is the Law. You’d think after a lifetime of living in the Law, it would be easier, but ironically I’ve found it makes it harder to recognize. Which, by the way, makes our task even more urgent given that so many widely heard preachers make quite a living at preaching the Law and lots of people are living in it and don’t even know it.

At any rate, I have to work a little harder to find the Law. And when it comes to difficult tasks, my mind craves symbols. Sometimes I even dream in symbols. Have you ever had that where you go to bed thinking about something and then you end up dreaming about it all night. Especially in seminary this was true, I would go to bed wrestling with some theological concept and in my dream my mind will come up with symbols that helped me understand it.

So making the Law/Gospel distinction comes down to working with

three very simple symbols, you'll definitely recognize one.

The first is just a plain line "I". This for me is Adam as he was intended to be. Or me or you as we were intended to be- in shalom with God, creation, and neighbor. Now the Law, when it is applied in one's life as the means of salvation, as the Pharisee's of the Gospels applied it, it has the effect of taking this "I" and curving it in on itself "@". For me this symbol is a simplified version of someone wrapped in the fetal position. It also points to the Latin phrase Martin Luther uses in his Lectures on Romans, "incurvatus in se." I'll read his words in case you don't have perfect recall of Luther's lectures:

"Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake." [2]

This is the visual of our condition when we lean on the Law for salvation. So curved in on ourselves that we can see nothing, not God or neighbor, because we're staring at our own navel. So when I approach the text, I'm looking for this symbol to jump out and help me identify the Law- or where it's application is drawing people into themselves- where their world is being made to shrink. That is where I begin the diagnosis step of the Crossings method in order to get to the external, internal, and eternal problem.

And now the visual you all know so well, of course. It has all the elements of the first two symbols. Christ on the cross. The Gospel in symbol form is the complete opposite of this curved in

self, that is seeking to protect what it's worked so hard for. Christ on the cross, arms spread wide, completely open and curved toward us. So much so that he exposed his entire body to full weight of the Law for our sake. And that is the beginning of our restoration back to this symbol "I" and our appropriate use of the Law as gift and blessing. So when I approach text to find the Gospel, I'm looking for the cross, of course, although not every text points to it directly, so it takes a bit of mining. That is where I begin the prognosis step of the Crossings method, and get to the eternal, internal, and external solution.

Those are my symbols. Not overly creative, but they help me and as a former youth pastor, I can tell you that kids think in bullet points and emoticons and symbols, so this helped them make sense of Law/Gospel. But it also helps me approach the text simply. One of my go-to texts for demonstrating these symbols is when in John 20 Jesus appears to the disciples. I'll read it, verses 19-23:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews (remember fear is the opposite of faith according to Luther), Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

So there you have it. The disciples had gone back to their old habits of unfaith and the result was an ever shrinking world where they were literally locked away from God and neighbor

(can't hardly share the Good News when you're locked in room) totally curved in. Into that sealed world, the crucified Christ, still bearing the marks of the cross, walks in. The uncurving begins, from there they are sent back out into a larger world to forgive sins, their lives takes on this cruciform shape.

I have given this text the full Crossings methodological treatment, I can email to you if you'd like. But the symbols are usually my starting point and my spin to the method.

Now because I am just a fledging new to flight in ministry and in employing the Crossings method, I am just beginning to notice some of the challenges and difficulties I've encountered in my efforts to spread the Gospel and I don't have all the answers to those difficulties. I'm going to share with you a couple of them, such as they are, in hopes of simply adding to the important dialogue that goes on between people concerned with promoting the Promise. First, I gotta tell you what happened a few weeks ago when I was telling Dr. Ed Schroeder about some of my difficulties. We saw each other at the Rev. Mary Etta Skinner's celebration of 30 years of ordained ministry, congratulations to her, she is s dear friend and has my deep admiration. At her celebration Ed inquired as to my first few months of ministry. And I started to tell him that sometimes the pressure to preach on a specific topic made it difficult to stay true to the Crossings method." To which he quickly and succinctly replied, "Well stay true to the cross, my dear, not the method!"

That is the first difficulty I have encountered. Staying true to the cross. And the biggest threat to that in my ministry so far is the pressure to push mission. Mission was the buzzword as I went into seminary and it was the mandate as I graduated. Mission. Now we know that when the Gospel is received and the promise of forgiveness trusted, that people are moved from

beneficiaries of mercy to agents of mercy. That is the response of faith made active in love. And that love is what we're talking about with mission. It is the love of neighbor in word and deed. It is the feeding and healing ministries we do in the world. It is the peace and compassion we advocate for. That is mission. It is the fruit of our faith.

But more and more mission is presented as the Gospel. Mission is presented as the means by which we are made right with God and one another. Mission, in good old fashion terms, is works righteousness. A problem Crossings has been noticing for many years and Lutherans have been noticing for many many hundreds more. So my difficulty in feeling pressure to preach works righteousness is nothing new, for me and many of my peers it just wears the mask of mission. So many sermons have I heard, many preached from the academy, where the Good News of the text came down to an instruction to serve the homeless a warm meal, or plant a community garden, or recycle more, or go on a mission trip. The promise is always the "feeling" of closeness to God and of forward progress for the human community.

The question is, and perhaps has always been, how do we commend good works without losing sight of the Gospel? How do we preach Christ crucified to people desperate for personal direction? Because that is real in our culture. People are hungry for meaning and are looking to the church to provide outlets for service. I saw this more clearly in my own church this past Thanksgiving. We sponsored a Thanksgiving meal for O'Fallon Community, aimed at serving turkey dinners to those who otherwise would not have one. It was the first of its kind and joint sponsored with several churches. We fed thanksgiving meals to about 75 people. We had over 125 volunteers. More people showed up to serve than to be served. Folks are looking to serve, they are looking for outlets to serve. And so it's no surprise that preaching falls into the trap of simply naming

those outlets to serve. The problem is, of course, noble and worthy as it is, mission is simply the iron fist in the velvet glove. What happens when the one who serves as though it were the means to be made right with God loses the ability to serve? How can one be made right then?

I don't have the sweet spot answer to commending works. But, I know it's worthy of conversation as it pertains to homiletics among both lay and clergy. Of course part of that conversation, if not the bulk of it, will have to be about the 3rd use of the Law. The details of which are beyond the scope of my humble enterprise tonight. And certainly the hour grows late, so perhaps it can be part of your night-cap conversations. Let me give you just a little more fodder for that chat. It comes from the Rev. Karl Boehmke, some of you may know him. He and I met at Bethel Lutheran Church in St. Louis during my vicarage there in 2012. Our friendship was forged in a heated debate on sanctification one afternoon and though he has moved out west to Pullman, Washington, we still trade emails on the topic from time to time.

I'll share some of his last email to me, sent when he learned I was speaking at this conference.

Dear Candice, I see that good things will be discovered in Unearthing Gospel Gold, next January, and that you will have your turn to speak. My hope is that a Silver Lode of Law might also be rediscovered, and perhaps that you with pick and shovel of biblical theology might help in the re-opening.

When LCMS experienced its trial as by fire 30 years ago, the issue of Third Use of the Law came very briefly into the open.

Some of us hoped at that moment that the subject might be studied and debated. But other issues overshadowed it.

On page 4 of Crossings, Michaelmas, Vol. 115, the First Use of Law at three levels is beautifully set forth. Likewise the blessings of the Gospel at three levels. The Third Use of Law at its two levels is conspicuously absent. This is typical of much present-day Lutheran and Reformed theology. My contention is, that this absence is responsible for the guilt which Lutherans carry with them instead of the joy of salvation and a determination toward a life of holiness. Garrison Keilor may laugh at Lutheran guilt but it is by no means an insignificant burden.

God through Jesus Christ sets us free from the sin which the Law has made clear to us (First Use). It was sin, not the Law, which condemned us; the Law itself is good, a blessing from God.

Once we are freed from sin, we are free to do those things which are pleasing to him who calls us into his marvelous light. We can rejoice in good works!!!!!! We can follow in the footsteps of Jesus who perfectly fulfilled the Law of love.

I do believe Law and Gospel work in tandem in one and the same circular dynamic. Both a gift of God's grace.

Please, Candice, continue digging into scripture to see whether these things be so. And much happy association between the Crossings Method and Yourself! Joy, Karl

So, there you have it. Mission and the 3rd Use of the Law. Talk among yourselves later. And please include me and your communities in the conversation!

Lastly tonight, I want to talk about the difficulties of preaching a Gospel of life amidst a shifting ethic of death in our culture. Way to end on a happy note, right? But this one is the biggest struggles for me, especially in my ministry to young people who are all around them beset by a culture that is either obsessed with death for all the wrong reasons on the one hand or misunderstands the totalizing power of death on the other hand. Let me pull all that apart a little bit.

My grandmother, Ann Wassell, still kicking in the Quad Cities at 90 has long told stories about gathering around her dying family members and saying good-bye to them in their own beds, in the own homes. They would hold vigil around them, praying, singing, and reading scripture. Death, for her and for many others in her generation, was a family matter, dealt with at home. And in that way, there was no escaping it's harsh reality and it's often gruesome details. As we have progressed, I use that term loosely, the business of death has been removed from the family home. Up until I was in my late twenties, the only encounter I had with death was at the funeral home, where my loved one looked anything but dead as they lay in their coffin in full makeup. Death in that sense is becoming less real for young people. And that has had a strange effect in my estimation. It has made death more easily parodied and portrayed in violent, graphic detail on movie screens and video games. And then what follows suit is a desensitization to death in general. It's simply a game we play or a show we watch.

And so a Gospel that takes seriously Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Finds little purchase on ears who trivialize death to the point of absurdity and witness it's grossly cartooned display with a distorted sense of normalcy. Only to have that coupled with a 24 hour news cycle that reports death all day to the point of making it routine. The net effect

of which is that death has lost it's power among the youngest people we seek to share the Gospel of life with.

And unfortunately the church colludes with this development as it so often misrepresents and denies the power of death. We do this most often when we reduce death to just the physical body and grant life eternal to disembodied souls that escape the dying body at the last moment. It's the heaven and hell talk everybody does, but no one really follows through to it's natural conclusion. It's the gentle words meant to comfort, "that our loved is looking down on us from heaven, or that Grandpa's spirit is in a better place." It is the dualistic language that is the common parlance of Hallmark cards and contemporary music and self help book. And is it simply not Biblical. And it simply distorts Christian hope in the face of death.

For this, I must turn to author Douglas John Hall for help. In his book, *The Cross in our Context*, Hall talks about the difficulty our society faces in dealing with death. The existence of an immortal soul that escapes the total eradication of death faced by just the physical body is the solution to a massive denial of death. Put simply, we don't have to die all the way because our spirit escapes to some ethereal heaven in the clouds. In this way, Hall says, sin loses its severity, death loses its sting, and Christ's salvific crucifixion on the cross is cheapened. Spirit and soul language softens the blow of judgment and tarnishes the shine of grace. Put simply again, it makes both the Law and Gospel forgettable. And if that's the case, you might as well preach mission. Because all around us are several generations of people for whom death is remote, yet also commonplace and only half bad since your soul gets away with it.

The answer for us, as Lutherans who take seriously the deadliness of sin, is that we must reach back into the scripture

and pull out bodily resurrection. The only hope in the face of real death is bodily resurrection, as the death of the body, the whole body (soul included) is as Paul says to the Corinthians in 15:26, “The last enemy to be destroyed.” And the resurrection in Christ is as Paul says in Romans 8:23, “the redemption of our bodies.” The whole deal. Nothing escapes death and in that way, a theology of the cross, where death is completely conquered by Christ is truly the Good News that sets us free. We have to take our methodologies all the way to Easter in the pulpits and take seriously the task of Christian Education in the Sunday School classroom. And not to get on a soapbox, but we have to address as parents and mentors the culture of death and violence our children and young people are subjected to. It’s real and if you have a young person in your life, as I have, you know how concerning it is.

So those are the two difficulties, though there are others, that I’m working through. Thank you for letting me share them and my journey to Crossings with you. We have some time, I welcome any questions or comments you might have.

[CandicePresentation \(PDF\)](#)

“Football Fandom: The Idolatry of College Football”

Unearthing Gospel Gold
Crossings Seminar January 25-27, 2015
by Bill White

Step 1:

I had made an idol of my beloved college football team: The Maroon Bulldogs of Mississippi State University. “Hail State! Go to hell Ole Miss! S-E-C, S-E-C, S-E-C!!!”

This was evidenced by the inordinate, idolatrous amount of *time, talent, and treasure* I gave/devoted to my team relative to the amount of *time, talent, and treasure* I gave/devoted to Jesus Christ. For example, the amount of time I spent any given week reading about college football and MSU, listening to sports talk radio, etc. versus the amount of time I spent reading the Bible, praying, listening to God, etc. Or, for instance, the amount of money I spent on college football: season tickets, MSU clothing, parking, tailgating, travel to games, the Bulldog Club, etc. versus the amount of money I gave above my tithe to the ministries of Jesus Christ.

My thoughts, words, and deeds bore witness to the world that Mississippi State sports, especially football, was THE most important thing in my life.

Step 2:

Even worse there was something underlying this: misplaced faith. Unwittingly, I was “fearing, loving and trusting” my favorite college football team to give my life meaning and purpose; this, instead of “fearing, loving and trusting” Jesus Christ.

When Mississippi State lost a game I was miserable! I couldn’t sleep. My thoughts would be consumed by replaying the game over and over again in my mind, analyzing what went wrong. My heart ached. My stomach hurt. I would be depressed. And whether we won a game or not I was obsessed daily with what was happening with my team: injuries, getting ready for the next game, recruiting, etc. The fact is I was sin-sick. The way, truth and life for me was MSU football, not Jesus.

Step 3:

If someone or something did not intervene on my behalf, when my “judgment day” came, I would be found to be with faith in Mississippi State sports instead of faith in the God who loves me and comes to me in Jesus Christ. In other words, because my faith was in something other than Christ, come my judgment day, I was doomed. My Maroon Bulldogs could not save me from judgment under God’s Law, from the consequences of my sin, from the devil, or from death.

Step 4:

BUT someone had intervened for sinners such as I. By his life, death on the cross, glorious resurrection, and his ascension, Jesus has overcome the power of sin, death, and the devil for all time. Anyone who hears Jesus’ word and believes God who sent him has eternal life and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

Step 5:

Jesus offered the “sweet swap” to me personally, i.e. Jesus came to me and freely offered to exchange true faith in him for my idolatrous, misplaced faith. The Holy Spirit worked this gift of faith within me, reconciled me to God, assured me that I was forgiven of my sinful idolatry and misplaced faith, and called me to a new life in Christ.
(2 Corinthians 5:18-21)

Step 6:

Having received God’s gracious gift of true faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit empowered me to repent, empowered me to be a new creation. As Saint Paul proclaims, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the

new has come.

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Hence, I now “get to” put enjoying college football and my favorite team in their proper place and perspective, namely, acceptable recreation as opposed to idolatry. I “get to”—and I want to—spend more of my time, talent, and treasure on Jesus than I do college football.

Moreover, God uses me now to lovingly invite others to identify the idols in their lives and to seek God’s grace and power to repent of them.

[2015FootballFandomCrossing \(PDF\)](#)

a) “Unearthing Gospel Gold,” a Seminar, with a Nudge from Taiwan. b) Felde on the Lord’s Prayer.

Colleagues,

All that clinking of glasses on New Year’s Eve seems to have encouraged the runner Time to quicken the pace. As I write we’re scarcely a week away from the annual Crossings gathering at the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis. The first of these happened in 2007. In the years since, we’ve fallen into the pattern of hosting a full-blown conference in even-numbered years and a shorter

seminar in the other ones. This year features the latter, an event running for two evenings and a day-and-a-half, from Sunday, January 25, 7 p.m., through noon on Tuesday the 28th. As at past seminars, conversation will focus squarely on an exploration of the methodology that shapes our work at Crossings, and of the theology that drives it.

A few days ago Cathy Lessmann, the person who manages the practicalities of our Crossings operation, sent a note around advising that there were still some slots open for this year's seminar. "Act now," she said. My purpose here is to punch that up with an exclamation point.

Those of you who read this by e-mail will be thoroughly familiar with the kind of work that the Crossings method generates. After all, the same e-mail service that delivers these Thursday Theology postings to your inbox also brings you weekly text studies, each of them laid out in the six-step pattern that the late Bob Bertram developed in conversation with his colleague, Ed Schroeder. It builds on the prior work of Richard Caemmerer, the great teacher of homiletics who used the middle decades of the past century to shape a few generations of Missouri Synod preachers, some of whom would spill into the momentary Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and after that into the ELCA. I sat in Caemmerer's classroom, as did my father before me. Not that we've discussed this much, but if we did, we'd surely recall the same unmistakable goal: to get us, as explicit "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4:1), delivering nothing less or other than Christ and his benefits as God's essential gift to sinners.

So too with Bertram's refining of Caemmerer's ideas in the form of the Crossings method. Again the aim was—and is—to rivet attention on Christ-for-us, inviting hearts to grab hold of this as the Word of words from God to anchor a life on today.

Bertram's key contribution was to sharpen the focus on the dynamic interplay between faith and works that God seeks constantly to address through the simultaneous operations (pl.) of his twofold Word, Law on the one hand, Gospel on the other, the former exposing the poisonous convictions that generate shabby behavior and leave one butting heads with God, the latter creating the confidence in God, rooted in Christ, that spills into thoughts, words, and deeds that cheer the Father's heart and bless the world. Yes, this sounds at first blush like a mess of theologian's gobbledygook, which brings us promptly to Bertram's—and Schroeder's—next great gift, a way to lay this out in a manner that folks who haven't sat through seminary classes can grasp, appreciate, and use in their own encounters with the Word, and in their daily entanglements with the confounding gift of life in God's world.

This, then, is the method that Crossings uses and touts, and the chief subject of the forthcoming seminar. If you haven't sat through one of these, I commend it to you as worth the price, and then some, a veritable deal-of-deals that will make your best Black Friday door-buster look like some kind of sordid rip-off. Let me also underscore what the paragraph above suggests, that this is not for pastors only, though we certainly encourage pastors to come, and seminarians too, tuition waived for the latter. But so committed are we to sharing the value, that any first-time attendee can expect a 50% tuition discount; and we encourage you, with that in mind, to spread the word to anyone you know who might be interested. A Sunday School teacher. A youth leader. A key member or two of your church council. A person who keeps checking in at Bible studies and asks the kind of questions that probe for God's message to them, and its usefulness come Monday morning. A college student who is serious about the faith, but still entangled in a gauzy web of legalistic notions that it's all about doing what you're

supposed to do to make God happy. Are the college kids of 2015 as susceptible to romantic notions as they were in my day? If so, tell them you're packing them off on a last-minute prospecting adventure, where the treasure sought is Gospel gold—thus our title—many grams of which you expect them to come home with.

Or better still, tell those students that Elder Chen wants them to go.

And who is Elder Chen? Well, we learned about him only yesterday, in a note from Dr. Jukka Kaariainen. Jukka has twice blessed our conferences with penetrating Law/Gospel analyses of the matters under scrutiny, most recently a year ago when he joined us via Skype from his study in Taiwan. He teaches theology there, at China Lutheran Seminary. Here's what he passed along yesterday:

I wanted to briefly share with you how the Crossings preaching method is bearing fruit in Taiwan. I taught my fall systematics class the 6-step preaching method and had them write a sermon using it.

One of my students was a 59-year old, retired police captain. Aboriginal. Formerly Presbyterian church elder. Grew up in the mountains, hunting wild game. 2nd career seminarian. He'll be graduating in May and heading off to a church.

This man has become the biggest fan of the Crossings method! He profusely thanks me, almost every time he sees me, about how the methodology has changed, not only how he preaches (at his internship church, etc), but also how it's positively changed his relationship with his wife and others. Quote from our lunch conversation just now— "I just try to remember, it's all about magnifying Christ." I am hopeful that Elder Chen (as we reverently call him, being almost 20 years my senior!) will be a

bright beacon in the hazy horizon of charismatic legalism in the Taiwan church! He told me, "Be sure, whenever you teach, to teach that preaching method and have the students write a report on sanctification (my other assignment in class)."

Thus far Jukka. Seems to me that we need lots of bright beacons in the hazy horizons of the legalisms afflicting the U.S. church at present. Their name is legion. Amid them and against them, we aim at Crossings, in our own small way, to strike the match called Christ. This, in sum, will be our Belleville agenda. God grant that you and others can join the fun.

+ + +

Speaking of fun, you'll find some in the latest issue of Word and World, the journal of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. It's graced with an article by Crossings' own Marcus Felde, at once the president of our outfit and the consummate wordsmith who turns out our quarterly newsletter. The title is quintessential Marcus: "The Lord's Prayer: Who Could Ask for Anything More?" The content is the Gospel gold we'll be talking about when we get to Belleville, unearthed by the methodology of which Marcus is a master, and polished here to a piercing gleam. By all means take the time to read the article, receiving it as the theological substance of this week's post.

Just by the way, here's a line that jumped out at me immediately: "Christian faith seeks what God has promised us in Christ." Mini-aha: Well, of course! And since when has anyone said it quite that succinctly, or with quite that degree of clarity? Comes the corollary, another head-smacking insight: no wonder so many Christian people get frustrated with prayer. Possessed also of other faiths, they keep seeking from God what God has not promised us in Christ; and when God fails to follow through on their demands, they chafe and grumble. Not so, as Marcus teaches, when we pray as Jesus taught. I suddenly

can't think of another source I'll be turning to first or pushing harder the next time I need to help baptized people think about prayer, and practice it.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Describing the Law/Gospel Distinction: The Fuller Version

For our first post of 2015, here at last is the “Fuller Version” of Steve Kuhl’s explanation of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, written for publication on [the Crossings website](#). He passed it along to us at the same time as the “Simple Version” that we published in [Thursday Theology #843](#). Note, therefore, that this “fuller” text does not yet reflect any of the feedback submitted by you, our readers, after #843.

Again, please do let us know what you think of this longer text. (Does it make sense to you? Are there points with which you are inclined to argue? If so, which points?) As before, we’ll pass your feedback along to Steve, and we’ll be grateful for the chance to refine this text which will play such an important role on the website.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

What is Meant by “The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel”?

Fuller version:

“The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel” refers to an overarching rule of thumb or governing insight for understanding and organizing the Christian Message as a whole. It informs both the way biblical texts are interpreted (see [Text Studies](#)) and the way the Christian Message is related to contemporary hearers (see the [Blog](#)). As a rule of thumb, it functions to remind Christians that the central concern of the Christian Message has to do with our standing before God (as blessed or cursed, righteous or unrighteous, under law or under gospel) instead of immediately seeking what actions we should or should not do.

Foundational to the distinction between Law and Gospel is, first of all, Jesus’ own teaching as presented in the New Testament Gospels and most vividly stated in the Gospel of John, where the contrast between Moses and Jesus is a constant theme, beginning already in the very first chapter (John 1:17). It then becomes a major organizing principle in the Epistles as they address issues in the first Christian congregations. We see this especially in Paul’s central assertion that the ungodly are justified before God by trusting in the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ and not by obedience to the *Law* (cf. Rom. 4:5, 3:28; Gal. 3:22). Here Paul is proclaiming that the Gospel puts the ungodly in a new, justified standing before God in a way that is impossible for the Law to do. Throughout the ages, this central assertion has guided the ship of the Church through many stormy theological seas. While the Crossings Community tends to look to Luther [1] and the signers of the *Augsburg Confession* and its *Apology*[2] as our primary teachers in the art of

distinguishing Law and Gospel, it is important to remember that they themselves deny that this way of thinking originated with them or is their exclusive domain. Far from being originators of the teaching, they claimed to have learned it through a careful study of the Old and New Testaments [3], the writings of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine [4], and numerous other figures in Church history, providing extensive citation to back up their claim. Therefore, we regard the art of distinguishing Law and Gospel as having ecumenical standing in Church History.

The proper distinction between Law and Gospel recognizes both the substantive difference between Law and Gospel and the logical correlation of the two [5]. In a sense, Law and Gospel relate the way problem and solution relate. The Law is ultimately concerned with identifying humanity's problem before God; the Gospel is ultimately concerned with identifying the divine solution for humanity. For this reason the Crossings Matrix is organized as two parts: Diagnosis and Prognosis, language used by Crossings co-founder Robert Bertram for its pun-ability. The diagnosis refers to the way God, through the Law, "sees through us," like an X-ray technician, to expose a basic conflict with God at the root of our existence; the prognosis, by contrast, refers to the way God, through the Gospel, "sees us through," like a surgeon, by reuniting us to God through the death and resurrection of Christ. The Diagnosis progressively identifies the human-divine problem beginning with our outward circumstances; moving to our internal rationalizations, convictions, and discontents; culminating in God's deadly way of dealing with us as sinners. The Prognosis picks up where the Diagnosis leaves off and progressively identifies the divine-human solution, beginning with God's gracious intervention on behalf of sinners by Christ, moving to our internal appropriation of that solution by faith, culminating in a new engagement with our outward circumstances

on the basis of that solution by love.

The need to distinguish Law and Gospel emerges from the fact that God himself (as necessitated by the Event of Jesus Christ and attested to by Scripture) engages the world in one of two fundamentally different ways. Through the Law, God, in his righteous judgment, exposes and condemns sinful humanity and, ultimately, sentences us to death: “the wages of sin is death...” (Rom 6:23a). Through the Gospel, by stark contrast, this same God, in his unfathomable mercy, promises sinful humanity reconciliation and eternal life for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Through the Gospel, God approaches sinful humanity with a magnanimous promise of reconciliation to God and life with him in eternal blessedness for the sake of Christ: “...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23b).

Through the Law we see that the human condition consists of the triad of our sin, God’s Law and the sentence of death (cf. 1 Cor. 15:56). Although the Law is “holy and right and good” (Rom 7:12) in its condemnation of sinners, the dark side of the Law is that it ultimately offers no help or hope to sinners.

What the Law of God could not do because of sin—namely, endear us to God—the Gospel of Jesus Christ does for those who trust in him. The Law of God is a word that requires something of us and, because we fail to meet those requirements, always ends up accusing us, designating us, in biblical language, as sinners. It is in this demanding and accusing capacity that the Law functions civilly to restrain sinners and spiritually to condemn sinners. The Gospel of God, by contrast, is a different sort of word, an offer that brings relief to sinners, that “solves” the consequences of the “problem” of failure. In that capacity, it is, at once, a report concerning what God has done for sinners in Jesus Christ and a direct address inviting sinners to follow

Christ through death into life.

Intrinsic to the distinction of Law and Gospel is a theology of the cross, meaning that God works his saving deeds counterintuitively, through the sign of the opposite. The counterintuitive nature of the Gospel is seen in its single-minded invitation to sinners to die to self and rise with Christ (cf. Mt 16:24-26). The death the Law pronounces on sinners happens! "In Adam all die!" (1 Cor. 15:22a). But when that death is accompanied by Christ (which by faith it is), that death is surpassed by Christ's resurrection, which becomes the believer's own resurrection, too! "In Christ all are made alive!" (1 Cor. 15:22b). Through the Gospel, then, a new human condition (Paul calls it the new creation in Christ) comes into existence. It exists now, already, in hope, in the form of new impulses of faith towards God and love towards others. It will exist in the age to come as something that surpasses human imagination.

Integral to the distinction of Law and Gospel are (at least) four closely aligned corollaries.

The first is the distinction between faith and works. To assert our works in the face of the Law's accusations is to aggravate God's righteous wrath and to heap further condemnation upon ourselves; to repent of self and trust in Christ's work not only honors the truth of God's Law, but puts an end to the law (Rom. 4:10): for faith in Christ means victory over the Law, sin and death (1 Cor. 15:56).

The second is the distinction between life under Law and life in the Spirit. Those who live by faith alone in Christ live not by the prodding of the Law, but by the power of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:13-26). Paul calls such a way of living freedom. "For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1), aka, the Law.

A third corollary is the idea that the Christian person is simultaneously sinner and saint: a sinner when measured by the works of the Law, a saint when measured by faith in the Gospel. Christians are never righteous in themselves, but only by virtue of faith in Christ. This side of the grave, Christians constantly struggle with sin (aka unbelief), and they daily experience the accusation of the law; but inasmuch as they believe the Gospel, even though their faith be only the size of a mustard seed (Mt. 17:20, Lk 17:6, etc.), they are covered by the forgiveness of sin and the righteousness of Christ, which trumps the Law's accusation and endears them as saints, holy in the sight of God.

The fourth corollary presupposes the third corollary and relates to the role of the Law in the life of the believer. The proper distinction between Law and Gospel does not reject the role of the Law in the life of the Christian, but it does reject any attempt to fashion the Law into a source or motive for the Christian life, including the ethical life. As corollary two stated, the Christian lives by the Spirit not the Law. True, the Law performs the same two functions in the lives of Christians that it does in the lives of non-Christians: it exposes sinners (the theological function of the law) and holds sinners in check (the social function of the law). But what distinguishes Christians from non-believers (making them saints, holy and righteous in God's sight in spite of the findings of the Law) is their faith in Christ. Because of faith Christians welcome the Law's accusation for the purpose of repentance and they still support the Law in its social function to check evildoers for the sake of the common good, but they do so as people who are free from the Law and who walk in the Spirit which is freedom. As such, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel rejects the idea of a Third Use of the Law, as Melanchthon and Calvin taught, that binds the Christian life to the measure of the Law.

Throughout the Crossings website you find many articles that employ the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Some of them explicitly explain and expand on the idea. Others simply put it into practice for interpreting a biblical text or supporting the vocation of Christians in the world. In general, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is like a finely crafted tool whose use is refined only by practicing it. We invite you to learn more about the practice of distinguishing Law and Gospel by using the resources on this site, by receiving our weekly text studies and blogs, and by joining us in one of our many seminars, conferences, and workshops.

Endnotes

[1] "Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian." *LW* 26:115

[2] "All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises," *The Book of Concord: The Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Editors, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

[3] See, for example, Hosea 6:6; Jer. 31:31ff, John 1:17; Mt. 9:13; Gal. 4:21ff; 1 Pet. 5:5, to name a few. Interestingly, many of the summary statements about distinguishing Law and Gospel in the New Testament are quotations from the Old Testament.

[4] See, especially, Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter* in which he sets forth the distinction between of Law and Gospel as the heart of Paul's theological method and the basis of his critique of Pelagianism.

[5] No twentieth-century theologian pounded home the importance of affirming a substantive distinction between Law and Gospel

more than Werner Elert. This he did to counter what he saw as major deficiency in Barth's theology and Barth's assertion that the distinction between Law and Gospel is merely a semantic one. See especially, Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, translated by Edward H. Schroeder, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 5.