

#763 Talking with the “Nones”

Colleagues,

The “nones” are on the rise, we hear. In case you missed it, these are the folks who say “none” when pollsters ask what religious tradition they belong to. They don’t do church, period. Ditto for synagogue, mosque, or temple. Talk of the transcendent bemuses them. It comes across as silly, having no demonstrable connection to reality that they can see or imagine, and being therefore of no use in comprehending their lives in the world, let alone in shaping those lives. The Bible is a book they’d just as soon not read. Why bother with nonsense?

Comes the increasingly urgent question: how does someone who takes God-talk seriously bridge the conversational chasm between her and another who doesn’t? How might a Christian someone speak intelligibly with this other about the hope that animates her? How might she tempt the “none” to show the slightest interest in having that discussion?

On Tuesday this week the 40+ people at the Crossings seminar in Belleville, Illinois, got a surprise lesson in this from Ed Schroeder. It was so good that we’d be cheating the rest of you if we failed to pass it along here.

Ed cranked this piece out on Monday night. In it he addresses the four characters in the 2011 Roman Polanski movie, *Carnage*. You can find plot summaries online. Here’s the one from [IMDb](#). (Be sure to peruse before going further.) Marcus Felde had brought the movie along as an example of how issues addressed in a Biblical text surface in secular contexts. We watched it on Monday afternoon. Later that evening Marcus “crossed” both the context and the underlying issues with a superb homily and some follow-up reflections. Meanwhile Ed, who had gone home early,

got to thinking what he'd say as a Christ-confessor to the folks in the movie, none of whom exhibit the slightest inclination toward matters overtly religious. Here's what he came up with. Notice, when he talks about Christ he does so only in preliminary kind of way. Mostly he shows them how Christian usages of the words "God" and "law" intersect intimately with their own heated conversations, and he winds up tempting them to hear more about a genuine alternative in the Jesus story. It seemed to lots of us who listened yesterday that he did so convincingly. "Spot on," as my Australian friends might say.

Enough from me. Enjoy. Learn. Join the rest of us in giving thanks.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Ed Schroeder to the characters in the movie Carnage, which ends with one of them saying, "This is the worst day of my life."

You've been living out a very Biblical kind of story here in the living room (and bathroom and kitchen). That may surprise you.

1. The worst day of my life is what the Bible calls Judgment Day.

Don't have to wait till the end of the world for that. Though that is the FINAL judgment, but Judgment day is every day. You don't even have to believe in God—and still it happens. You've just done it here. Judging each other left and right so that your own FINAL JUDGEMENT, final verdict is: This is the worst day of my life. And after all the judging, what's left? Carnage. Makes me think of Hamlet or Macbeth: final scene = corpses all over the floor. Living by the law, though it seems as though you

should be able to use the law of equity/fairness/recompense to “save” things—your sons, yourselves. The cool cat of your quartet is even a LAWyer! As you argue your cases for making “right judgments” about the boys—and then about yourselves and each other—trying to “save” the situation, none of your attempts ever works. Bible-talk for that is “Salvation by the law never works. It always works the opposite. It’s an illusion.” I don’t have to ask you to believe that. You’ve just shown us viewers that this is the truth of your own lives.

Bible talk for that is that God put such a mechanism into the creation. Once more, you don’t have to believe in God to acknowledge that. You’ve been calling on that law of fairness, of retribution as though it did have a cosmic more-than-human quality, valid throughout the world.

Biblical term for what we’ve seen in this home is Life under the Law. One big element of which is living by the law of retribution. We can spec that out even more, if you wish. This living room has been a courtroom. Accusation, defense, calling for each other to be “fair” judges of your cases.

2. I want to move to another item in the Bible’s picture about Life under God’s law—God’s law, namely, the Law of PRESERVATION. In the last 30 seconds of the film (you folks didn’t see it, but the camera and we the audience did) life was continuing. The life of the hamster had been (miraculously?) preserved. And the kids (miraculously?) were playing together again. You might call it Good Luck for the hamster, and “kids will be kids” for the playground. Bible talk for that is that despite what’s doing on in the living room of judgment, destruction, God preserves our world, even though full of fractious (and

phony) live-by-the-law people, and sees to it that total destruction doesn't overwhelm our planet, nor us humans on it. Biblical word for that is God's goodness even in the face of what we witnessed in your living room. "He sends rain upon the just and the unjust."

3. Some Other News: You can continue to live another day after this "worst day" the same way you've been doing, possibly all your lives, or you can opt to live out another story line.

First, you'll have to hear it. You've doubtless heard about the Jesus story. I'll rehearse it here with you four in it as members in the cast. The story we've seen unfold about you is a classic tragedy. Corpses all over the floor. The Jesus story—even with you tragedians in it, yes explicitly WITH you tragedians in it—is a classic comedy. In the end everybody's still alive. And there's even joy. "Best day of my life." But it's even better than Shakespeare's comedies.

To live a different story-line you need to switch gods. You may consider yourselves atheists, or agnostics, I don't know. Bible view of what a god is, is not some supernatural being up there in the sky, but whatever you hang your heart on. And hang on to it for dear life. All four of you have shown us what that is for each of you. Each with a different deity (we can zero in on that, if you wish)—although the same principle is there when you "call on that God." Namely, "I want to be right, and I want the cosmic (divine?) law of retribution to work to show me to be right. Because I have solid evidence that I AM right."

So my pitch is to invite you to switch gods, since so far the god you've got has failed. And there is no promise, no grounds for you to hope, that your deity will EVER work

for what you trust it to do for you. HOPE needs SUCCESS (somewhere) for it to be a Hope worth Hoping. [An old friend named Bob Bertram coined that phrase.]

So switch gods. Nobody's gonna twist your arm. It's simply an offer. And the spin-offs that come with that offer when you take it are new possibilities for Love (even of those gosh-awful spouses you've exposed each other to be) and real Hope that the days yet to come for you will NOT be additional "worst days of my life," but good days even when the boys get into a fight and your spouse continues to be imperfect.

HOPE needs success. And FAITH always hangs onto a promise. Even phony faiths. Here's the Promise and Success angles of the Jesus-story. It's all about the four of you.

Wanna hear it now?

Addendum—

Two readers responded to last week's question about the Latin original of the words that were rendered "great sin" in one translation of the Luther quotation and "token sin" in another translation:

First, Rich Jungkuntz:

"The Latin reads, 'Utinam possem aliquid INSIGNE peccati designari modo ad aludendum diabolum, ut intelligeret, me nullum peccatum agnoscere ac me nullius peccati mihi esse conscium!'"

“Or see for
yourself: <http://archive.org/stream/werkebriefwechse0305luthuo>

[ft#page/518/mode/1up](http://www.theologische-buchhandlung.de/weimar.htm)

“For Luther’s Works online in the original languages, see <http://www.theologische-buchhandlung.de/weimar.htm> or <http://www.lutherdansk.dk/WA/D.%20Martin%20Luthers%20Werke,%20Weimarer%20Ausgabe%20-%20WA.htm?>”

Next, Gerald Anderson sent us this reflection, also referencing the first of Rich’s links–

“Useful piece, especially the part in brackets. Those lines figure prominently in the 2005 Luther movie, when Luther is preaching after a suicide. I’ve always wondered where in Luther’s works that came from.

“Look at <http://archive.org/stream/werkebriefwechse0305luthuoft#page/518/>. Letter to Hieronymus Weller, from Coburg, apparently soon after the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. The text you referred to in your footnote is 5th line from the bottom on p. 519:

“‘Utinam possem aliquid insigne peccati designare’ With my high school Latin, I would translate it, ‘Would that I could define [design] some [might have the sense of a special something] badge of sin’

“‘Insigne’ seems to have the sense of something conspicuous or distinguishing, which could relate to the translation ‘great,’ but I think the meaning is closer to ‘token’– an identifier.”

And, most recently, from Pam Vetter,

“I haven’t found Luther’s original text of the Weller letter, but as a lifelong Lutheran, I am guessing it’s likely to mirror

his famous, 'Sin boldly! (But believe even more boldly in Christ)'—so 'great' rather than 'token' would be my hunch. I also think of the hymn A Mighty Fortress: 'Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse; though life be swept away, he cannot win the day. The Kingdom's ours forever.'"

To all who wrote in: thank you! –JEB