

#766 Ash Wednesday Musings, with a Nudge from Machiavelli

Colleagues,

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

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

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

To the topic above:

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

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

I got to thinking about both these things last weekend after reading David Brooks's regular column in the Friday edition of

the *New York Times*. Under the title "[Florence and the Drones](#)" (Feb. 8, 2013), he laid out a quick summary of insights gained from a recent week of reading Machiavelli for a course at Yale.

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

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

"he just had a different concept of political virtue. It would be nice, he writes, if a political leader could practice the Christian virtues like charity, mercy and gentleness and still provide for his people. But, in the real world, that's usually not possible. In the real world, a great leader is called upon to create a civilized order for the city he serves. To create that order, to defeat the forces of anarchy and savagery, the virtuous leader is compelled to do hard things, to take, as it

were, the sins of the situation upon himself."The leader who does good things cannot always be good himself. Sometimes bad acts produce good outcomes. Sometimes a leader has to love his country more than his soul."

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

In the meantime, thanks to Brooks, I think I'll admire Machiavelli for a while. Caveat: does he still scare me? Sure, for reasons Brooks turns to at the end of his column. Princes too are sinners—"venal self-deceivers" in Brooks's phrasing—and such creatures have a habit of turning monstrous under the kind of burdens that Machiavelli would have them bear. Still, I do wish that Christians were as clear-eyed as Machiavelli is about the sheer impossibility of tiptoeing through life in a sinners' pigpen without getting dirty. Instead, visions of Moses-style righteousness keep dancing through Christian heads, and they keep attempting to live those dreams. I imagine Machiavelli would regard that as both stupid and irresponsible, and I'd have to agree with him. So would that Prodigal Son par excellence who entered the pigpen not to beat on its denizens but to join them at the trough. As it is written, "This fellow welcomes sinners, and eats with them" (Lk. 15:1). Then he went to his death,

tarred with their stink, made to be sin for the sinners, as Paul puts it. Paul also calls this the “act of righteousness” that pulls the rabbit of a saint’s future from the hat of a sinner’s fate (Ro. 5:18). That other fellow in sixteenth-century Wittenberg who got what this was all about was moved, so we’re told, to tell a prissy colleague to get over it and sin boldly. Had Machiavelli caught wind of this way down there in Florence, he might have added, “Sin wisely while you’re at it.” Or so I’d like to think.

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

Let me add that this is much more than a matter for abstract contemplation. It cuts directly to facts on the ground of the sort that Machiavelli was so well attuned to. For example, either we suck it up as sin-bearers-for-sinners or we make the kind of mistake LCMS President Matthew Harrison stumbled into last week when, to mollify the pure-doctrine crowd in his ranks, he called the synod’s young pastor in Newtown, Connecticut on the carpet for having risked a benediction amid doctrinal sinners at the community’s post-Sandy Hook mourning event, the one the U.S. president attended. To his enormous credit, President Harrison later apologized for having done this. May he pardon me for citing the incident even so to illustrate how a yen for righteousness will yield unrighteousness; how a horror

of sin can multiply sin. ELCA Lutherans have their own assorted ways of falling prey to this. So does every other Christian tribe that I'm aware of.

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

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

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

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

Jerome Burce

The day after Ash Wednesday, 2013