A Caveat for Maundy Thursday—Especially for ELCA Lutherans!

Colleagues,

On the eve of Maundy Thursday 2007 Jerry Burce, one of the pastors at Messiah Lutheran Church in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, sends me this eleventh hour “liturgy-alert” akin to the cyber-alerts that come our way these days when viruses are sneaking into our computers. This one sounds viral to me—sneaky too. What do you think?Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Last fall the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rolled out its brand new Evangelical Lutheran Worship and urged congregations to start taking it for a ride. For those outside the ELCA orbit, ELW is that church body’s new official liturgy-and-hymnbook, though its editors describe it more modestly as a core worship “resource” (p. 7), the main car in the driveway, so to speak, though not the only car. I’m glad they put it this way. It invites me and other ELCA pastors to do what some of us would do anyway, which it is to throw open the hood and start tinkering with the innards when the Check Engine light comes on.And sure enough, that’s happening from time to time. A case in point is the Prayer of the Day, Option 2, for this week’s Maundy Thursday. It appears to be a thorough overhaul of Maundy Thursday’s Option 2 in the preceding Lutheran Book of Worship, the overhaul done, one guesses, with an eye on recent

ecumenical commitments to groups for whom the older LBW language-"this Sacrament of your body and blood"-is a bit too vivid.

Anyway, here's how the ELW version goes: "Eternal God, in the sharing of a meal your Son established a new covenant for all people, and in the washing of feet he showed us the dignity of service. Grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit these signs of our life in faith may speak again to our hearts, feed our spirits, and refresh our bodies, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord…."

To which the discriminating Lutheran can only say "Aaargh!"

Off the top of my head, here are three reasons why the Check Engine light is glowing at this point.

1. *"…in the sharing of a meal." Is that "a meal" as in any old meal? It could be. It sure shouldn't be. Meals and the sharing thereof are the stuff of old creation, the standard mixed bag of blessing and curse. That's so not only of your garden variety Lutheran potluck, but also of that very special meal, the one that Jesus and his disciples actually shared that Thursday night. Passover, it's called. Came then The Meal, a brand new eating and drinking that took place "after the supper," i.e., when the old-creation sharing, chomping and slurping was done with. The operative verb for The Meal isn't "shared" but "given," its point and consequence being to connect us directly, specifically, and marvelously to the resurrected life of Jesus. ("This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you." "Is," not "signifies." Remember that, dear Zwingli.) That's what makes The Meal so special, and the night of its instituting so eternally important.*

2. *"…he showed us the dignity of service." Really, is this what the foot-washing was about, an object lesson in thinking nicely, say, about the folks who pick up our garbage or wash our toilets? Seems to me that the point lies rather and precisely in the indignity of service, and in the fact that the Lord of heaven and earth undertook this for our sake, and expects that we too will eat dirt that others might participate with us in his life.*
3. *"Grant that these signs" etc. So when and how did it happen among us that Holy Communion got demoted from "means of grace" to "a sign of our life in faith," whatever that may mean? Or how is it that the foot-washing is suddenly on a par with the sacrament as a source of refreshment for body, soul, and spirit? Last I heard there was a qualitative difference between the two, a promise being attached to the one and not to the other.*

If all this sounds like caviling and the picking of nits, that's because it is. But then nits-baby lice, remember?-can be irritating, and too many of them will make a body sick. Too many careless words and sloppy thoughts in the Church's prayer will do the same to the Body of Christ. That's why I'm sticking with the LBW prayer this Maundy Thursday. It's also why I plan to keep combing the ELW texts as I encounter them. I'm sure I'll turn up more rubbish. Then again, I'm just as sure that I'll run across some gems of faithful thought and fresh expression-lots of them, I trust. I'll thank God when I do.

Jerome Burce