

A Christian Message and the Virginia Tech Massacre—One More Time

Colleagues,

PART I

To begin with a full(er) disclosure on last week's posting. I did disclose—and send on to you—the five submissions that came in as “Christian Message Proposals for VTU the Day after the Massacre.” What I didn't tell you was that there were only three that “came in” from y'all. The other two were composed by yours truly. They did “come in,” but—you might say—through the windows. I'd hoped for a fuller basket, soAfter last week's posting another one arrived. I pass it on below. It's from an ELCA pastor in northwest USA. She told me that she purposely held verbatim to the original message offered at VTU as much as she could, and then “christified” it where she thought it could have been done. It's a fascinating exercise.

[En passant she told me that at her ELCA synod assembly recently “I made the cut from 54 nominees for bishop to seven.” From what she says below, they wouldn't have done wrong had they elected her, I think.]

I reprint here the VTU original and then the RCV (revised christified version) paragraph by paragraph. To highlight the emendations in the RCV they appear in caps. Both versions contain 304 words.

VTU original, paragraph 1.

We gather this afternoon for many purposes: to weep for lost

friends and family, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, to seek hope in the shadow of despair, to join our voices in a longing for peace, healing, and understanding greater than any single community of faith, to embrace that which unifies, and to reject the seductive temptation of hatred. We gather to share our hurts and our hopes, our petitions and our prayers. We gather also to drink deeply of religious streams which have refreshed parched peoples for generations. We gather together....Weeping, oh yes, we weep with sighs too deep for words, out of inexpressible pain-but also affirming the sovereignty of life over death.

RCV

We gather this afternoon for many purposes: to weep for lost friends and family, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, to seek hope in the shadow of despair, to join our voices in a longing for peace, healing, and understanding greater than any single community of faith, to embrace that which unifies, and to reject the seductive temptation of hatred. We gather to share our hurts and our hopes, our petitions and our prayers. We gather together....Weeping, oh yes, we weep with sighs too deep for words, out of inexpressible pain-but also affirming the GIFT OF GOD'S HEALING FOR OUR BROKENNESS.

VTU original, paragraph 2.

At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our joys, joys as simple as a glorious spring day on the drill field. We struggle to imagine a future beyond this agony. If we ever harbored illusions that our campus is an idyllic refuge from the violence of the world, they are gone forever. Yet we come to this place to testify that the light of love can not finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, the light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. We can not do everything, but we can do something.

We can not banish all darkness but we can, by joining together, push it back. We can not undo yesterday's tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn. As we share light, one with another, we reclaim our campus. Let us deny death's power to rob us of all that we have loved about Virginia Tech. Let us cast our lot with hope in defiance of despair.

RCV

At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our joys, joys as simple as a glorious spring day on the drill field. We struggle to imagine a future beyond this agony. If we ever harbored illusions that our campus is an idyllic refuge from the violence of the world, they are gone forever. YET WHEN THE VIOLENCE OF THE WORLD TOOK JESUS DOWN, GOD WAS THERE, WEEPING. GOD IS WEEPING HERE NOW. WHEN THE DARKNESS OF DEATH SNUFFED JESUS OUT, GOD DID NOT LET THE DARKNESS PREVAIL. GOD OPENED A DOOR INTO DEATH AND DREW JESUS OUT INTO LIFE AGAIN, SO THAT THERE WILL BE A WAY OUT OF THIS FEAR AND GRIEF FOR US, TOO. DEATH ULTIMATELY HAS NO power to rob us of OUR HOPE OR FUTURE IN CHRIST. AS we come to this place, we testify that BECAUSE GOD WAS IN CHRIST, RECONCILING THE WORLD TO GOD, the light of love cannot finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, the CHRIST-light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. CHRIST'S LIGHT AND LIFE AND LOVE ARE FOR US NOW.

PART II

This week also brought a thoughtful piece from another ELCA pastor, but not a 304 word homilette.

"I did not submit one for one very good reason. I wasn't there. I didn't experience what he experienced, I didn't have the constraints of time and of grief and maybe anger."Would I

have said something different . . . probably. Would I have at least mentioned God and Jesus . . . don't know . . . I hope I would have . . . but I surely would if I were submitting one to this forum. In academic exercises, we all want to please the teacher!

"I don't think your critique of Pastor King's remarks was unfair, rather misplaced. Certainly if you felt strongly enough about it, you should have brought it to our brother in Christ, just you and him. I assume you didn't do that. If you did, I apologize for my ass-u-me-tion.

"I don't know Pastor King at all, but I hope we can all cut him a little slack for his comments . . . It must have been a very hard week or weeks for him. And maybe we can assume . . . that he was and is a valuable pastoral presence within that community, and that maybe, just maybe, he touched lives through his ministry during that very difficult time.

"Blessings"

In my response I picked up on two items: the tete-a-tete recommended of "just you and him," and the "cut him a little slack for his comments."

A. the tete-a-tete, just "you and him."

The allusion is to Matthew 18:15ff. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." NRSV. That doesn't sound to me like the situation here. But more than one of you have told me that to you it did. Granted, you can't totally separate the message from the messenger. The object of my critique, however—doubtless not cleanly done—was the message, not the messenger. The message is an "objective" document out in the world, initially an "objective" public statement that went to

millions across the world. Apart from what the messenger may have intended, his "Christian message" now stands there, now an historical document. [If I did engage in ad hominem stuff, I was wrong. I've never met the messenger, had never heard his name before. I do not think that he "sinned against me," since he'd probably never heard of me either.]

Punning on Marshall McLuhan's popular axiom "The medium makes the message," Bob Bertram liked to say of pastors that "the message makes the messenger." Past ThTh postings have sought to check out the Christian message offered at VTU. Calling that message "Christ-less" is not an opinion. It's a fact. If there are no clouds and the sun is shining, the sky is blue. That is not an opinion. That is what the word "blue" means. If there is no Christ in a proposed Christian message, then the message is Christ-less.

That is the issue, not some sin separating Christian brothers.

But when I passed this on to this colleague, he was not convinced. "I would disagree. . . . I believe Matthew 18 applies in that Pastor King is a colleague, a peer of yours and mine. Even in the midst of his very public non-proclamation of the Christian message, he deserved to be taken aside, yes just you and him; for admonishment and correction."

And when it came to "cutting him some slack,"

I confessed not knowing how to do that vis-a-vis a Christless message passed off as Christian. Searching for NT precedents I found only the opposite. Jesus never "cut preacher-types of his day a little slack"—so far as I can tell—when they gave false witness, or even worse, when he labelled them false prophets. Paul cuts no slack when he anathematizes the "other" gospel circulating within his Galatian congregation. Remember it's the message that's being weighed and found wanting, though the

messenger is not far away. How do you “cut slack” on an “other” Gospel, a Christ-empty gospel? I don’t know how to do that. Possibly some of you in the Crossings community can show me how that can be done.

“We all goof up at times. Give the guy a break” is what I think I’m supposed to hear. True enough. If it weren’t so serious, I’d like to follow that counsel.

How serious is it? That is the question. If a message offers pabulum in the face of death where Christic-penicillin is called for—which seems perfectly clear to me and to RCV writer above—then the message is deceitful. If the doctor prescribing that pabulum wants us to think it’s Christic-penicillin, then we have a case of gross malpractice. How much slack is in order in such cases?

To these thoughts of mine this dear colleague sent back this trial-by-fire slice-of-life:

“My own willingness to cut him slack comes from my year-long experience as a Chaplain at a combat support hospital in Iraq. When I first heard about the massacre at Virginia Tech, I turned off news reports, didn’t listen to the tales of the carnage . . . for a week I struggled with the reaction of others to Pastor King’s “Christian” message. Having been in the eye of the storm for a year, I could imagine what he was going through. Did he know anyone killed, did he experience the grief and sorrow that all care-givers saw. Yes, we need to perform especially when the “shit” hits the fan. But you know, in the midst of unimaginable grief and sorrow . . . well. I was never asked to preach at a memorial service, unit chaplain’s got to do that. I simply prayed and cried along with the soldiers who came through the hospital, both wounded and staff.”I know how much I have struggled both that year

and since I got home to put my experience in a spiritual context. I am reminded of Roland Bainton's talking about Luther's discovery of the Gospel as he studied Psalm 22, "The judge upon the rainbow became the derelict upon the cross." Indeed in the midst of the carnage, God often seems absent, but in the midst of the suffering and death, there is our God, in flesh, in Christ Jesus. In the midst of the horror we cause, our Lord is present, in a massive way. Still working through it. So yes, I do cut Pastor King a little slack, and I hope and pray that he did indeed offer the hope of our Lord at Virginia Tech."

Slack for the messenger.

"Hope of our Lord at Virginia Tech" for the RCV message.

OK. All that's needed is to get the two together.

My hope and prayer too.

And surely that of all you readers.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder