

A Crossing for Thanksgiving Day 2000

Colleagues,

By popular demand (well, actually one Crossings junkie explicitly asked for it) I'm composing a Crossings style text study of this year's Gospel (Revised Standard Lectionary) appointed for the USA Day of Thanksgiving, a week hence on November 23, 2000. So substantively this Thursday Theology #127 belongs to the genre "Sabbatheology" (=text studies). But Thanksgiving in the USA is always a Thursday, the 2nd last one in November, so the ThTh label fits too.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Some history. The lectionary Gospel for this year's Thanksgiving Day, Matthew 6:25-34, was a "biggie" in my very first years as a teacher. It also is a cardinal text in the history of Crossings. How so?

Back in the late 1950s a few of us young Turks, most of us not yet thirty, theology instructors at Valparaiso University in northwest Indiana, were commissioned by the university prez to "do something!" about the Sunday-School style religion courses at Valpo. What was common at church-related colleges then was true with us too: four required two-credit-hour courses, all "survey" stuff—one each in Bible, doctrine, church history and ethics.

Head honcho for carrying out the "do something" mandate was new dept. head, Bob Bertram (he was over thirty!). Bob conjured the prime paradigm, we younger Turks hammered it out. Here's how it

went. Use the church lectionary as the theological backbone for the required four courses. Use the Gospel readings and their theological substance, week for week as they came up during the two semesters of the freshman year. Do likewise with the epistle pericopes for the sophomore year. Connect those readings (“cross them,” we now say) to slice-of-life stuff from the student’s own environment—academic and personal—as well as to the secular and churchly culture roundabout. Constrain students to practice such crossings in written work each week.

It was a wild experiment, conflicted all the way—within the department, within the university, and with many a student’s hometown pastor. We had about 5 good years, something akin to Luther’s word about God’s “Platzregen” that showers the land for a while—and then moves on. Later still, Bertram in ’63 and I in ’71 moved on to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and then into Seminex. The penchant for the pericopes and crossings-theology came along. Eventually the Crossing Community, Inc., a Missouri-not-for-profit corporation, came into being. Sabbaththeology and Thursday Theology continue the tradition.

If you want to know more about those origins, consult the current issue of Valparaiso University’s magazine, THE CRESSET (Reformation, 2000). Editor Gail McGrew Eifrig, a V.U. freshman when it all started in 1958, devotes 4 perceptive pages to this slice of her own life and what it did and didn’t do for the university to which she returned some years later as prof herself.

So what’s that got to do with Matt. 6 and Thanksgiving Day? you ask. First you must remember that in 1958 there was no three-year lectionary. Just a one-year lectionary with the same texts coming around again year after year as they had for perhaps a 1000 years in the Western Church.

So Matt. 6:25-34 was always the appointed Gospel for the 15th Sunday after Trinity. Even though the calendric mobility of Easter lengthened/shortened the Trinity season, Trinity 15 regularly popped up in September. So the fall semester of “New Testament Readings: Gospels,” freshman introduction to “university theology,” began with Matt. 6:25-34. And it proved to be a shocker.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is preaching on the first commandment, saying that there are really only two options—serving God or serving Mammon. You can only have one god at a time. Most all of our students knew that, and they (most of them LCMS Lutherans) had long since opted to serve God. No big deal. But Jesus’ own diagnosis presses deeper. Do you worry? he asks. Of course, we do. Who doesn’t? Well, then, do you notice that Jesus links worry with serving Mammon, not with serving God? So if you do worry—and who doesn’t—you are a first-commandment-breaker. Now, wait a minute! And as if that’s not bad enough notice how Jesus’ diagnosis gets grimmer and grimmer as he pushes deeper. It’s even worse than that.

I can’t lay my hands on the ancient syllabus pages for Trinity 15 right now, but I think I can reconstruct the Crossings-style paradigm. First I’ll key in the text (NRSV).

Matthew 6:25-33
RSL Gospel for (United States) Thanksgiving
Day,
November 23, 2000

24No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the

other. You cannot serve God and wealth (mammon). 25Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

I think we took 4 steps to get down to the final diagnosis—

Bad News: The Human Malady

1. Worry about anything, any anxiety about tomorrow, is part of the bad news of human life. But it’s even worse than that.
2. Root of that, says Jesus, is distrust of God as “Father in heaven,” – “you of little faith.”
3. Worse still (according to v.24) is, you are not trusting God, “devoted, serving” God, says Jesus; you are “hating, despising” God. He disallows any third possibility.
4. But it’s even worse than that. Note Jesus’ words about

grass—here today, in the oven tomorrow. Sounds like a “grass-like fate” for God-distrusters.

[I do remember that in class we checked the Exodus text for the original promulgation of the first commandment and noted the grim words for those who “do not love me and keep my commandment,” a visit from God with a total wipe-out clause. Grass-like fate indeed.]

And remember Jesus is doing this diagnosis on his disciples, not the worldlings who might be expected to be hooked on mammon, on “stuff,” getting it and hanging on to it. So even for disciples first-commandment-keeping is an impossible demand—and the consequences for not doing so lethal. Is there any good news to cope with this diagnosis, yes, finally to trump it? Yes, but in this pericope it is very brief, and then in code language to boot.

Good News: Healing for our Malady

1. The Kingdom of God and that kingdom’s righteousness (to cope with #4 above).

You need to read all of Matthew to put substance on this skeletal formula. This kingdom is what God’s up to in Jesus. The “Gospel according to Matthew” is his narrative about God’s new operation, God’s mercy-management for sinners—yes, even for first-commandment-breakers—in Jesus. Of course, you have to go all the way to the end of Matthew to learn how it is “Gospel,” really good news for first-commandment-breakers. In a word: He assumes our “grass-like fate” and on Easter God counter-signs that act along with Jesus’ invitation that commandment-breakers “follow” him. Even wilder is his claim that when following him we are fulfilling the first commandment, and thus home free!

2. Seeking that kingdom and its righteousness

To make the good news of the previous paragraph one's own is to trust this Jesus as God's mercy-management for one's self and thereby gain the righteousness that comes with it. Matthew regularly uses "follow me" and "faith" for the righteousness that "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees." That's a righteousness that trumps items 3 and 2 of the earlier diagnosis, a righteousness to be enacted in the face of "today's cares" and "tomorrow's worries." Which takes us to the final step.

3. "All these things as gifts"

Ah, yes, now back to the "things" we worried about as the process started, diagnosis level 1 above. Living like the birds and the lilies. Really!? Is that a human possibility? Well, he says so. Lilies and the birds do indeed work, but they don't worry, we're told. Of course, we need "stuff" to survive. But there are two ways to consider stuff. One is like the Gentiles, "striving for things" as though their life depended on it. The other option is facing one's daily life needs trusting that "indeed our heavenly Father knows." There is no formula for how to do this, only Jesus' own encouragement that it is so, and that in the nitty-gritty practice of such lily-like living we too will have it verified for ourselves.

Summa:

Thanksgiving Days calls us to reflect on how we relate to "stuff." [Think about that as you're stuffing the bird.] For all of us "stuff" is gift, even when we work hard to bring it home. Luther's one-liner for Thanksgiving was "Alles ist Gabe," everything is gift. Focusing on stuff as gift means focusing on the Giver. Christ gives us a new mercy-management connection with The Giver. From then on it's gift all the way down—kingdom, righteousness, the things as well. The heart of thanksgiving is trusting the Gift-Giver.