

A Reunion at the Lazarus Parable

Colleagues,

I got my come-uppance this past Sunday. A prominent ELCA pastor introduced me to a friend of his after the Sunday service of the congregation he pastors as: "Ed Schroeder, heresy-hunter." That was a surprise. [Marie thought she should've told him that "'Gospel-sniffer" was more accurate. By then it was too late. Win some; lose some.]

A bit of background. This past weekend the Schroeder clan gathered "back at the farm" for the 13th biennial gathering of the descendents of my grandparents, Friederich and Augusta (Taube) Schroeder. Both of them came from Germany as teenagers with their families in the 1880s. Their German Lutheran Missouri Synod connections in separate congregations around the Quad-Cities (Iowa and Illinois) led them to each other and to marriage and to the Schroeder farm in Coal Valley, Illinois—and to 14 children! The third in line of those kids was my father Heinrich.

With that many in the first born-in-America generation it will come as no surprise that 140 folks showed up for the 3-day festivities. And that's only a fraction of what the computerized clan genealogists (son Nathan prominent among them) have on their data bases.

Since the Wars of Missouri in the 1970s, going to church on reunion Sunday is dicey. In ancient days we'd all go to Trinity LCMS in Coal Valley IL—the church that grandpa helped build. But ELCAers aren't eligible for communion at Trinity even if you were baptized and confirmed there. That agonizes some of the

goldie-oldies—more often the LCMS Schroeders who say “Why can’t you ELCAers come to Trinity nevertheless—in memory of grandma and grandpa?” As some of you may suspect, the three generations that have now come after my own are less fastidious about such matters. And for some “going to church” at all is an adiaphoron.

So we attended the ELCA congregation last Sunday—biggest one in the Quad-Cities—where a 10-million-dollar building expansion is just getting underway. The guest preacher, a seminary professor, used the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus [Luke 16:19ff.] as his sermon text. And neither his sermon, nor any other element of the service, signalled any awareness of the “great gulf fixed” between the building cranes outside the nave windows and the point of the parable. Neither “Moses and the prophets” nor the “ONE resurrected from the dead,” the Jesus who originally spoke the parable, got much of a hearing. Or so it seemed to me. But then that’s what you expect from a heresy-hunter.

The preacher did get to level D-1 and D-2 in his diagnosis. And did so compellingly. All of us there in the congregation—preacher and people—were clearly in the Rich Man’s robes and not in Lazarus’ rags. We had HMOs to attend to our sores, and dogs only as pets. Crumbs from the table? Even our dogs don’t eat crumbs. Crumbs have never been our daily bread.

Yes, and it was even worse than that. Go to D-2. It was hardness of heart, blindness and deafness that was so ingrained that we do not (cannot?) see the wretched and hear their cries.

He articulated both of these masterfully—introducing us to faith-siblings he worked with in Central America who are Lazarus at our door today for D-1 crossovers. Likewise for D-2 crossings he drew parallels to our standard operating procedures (even in our churches) showing the interior sickness of heart that

nourishes such behavior in Lazarus-by-passers—[hereafter LBP].

And then he brought in Jesus. But it was too soon.

For the Jesus “necessary” to heal this much of our dilemma is Jesus the example, the instructor, even the critic telling us, yes shouting: “YOU’RE NOT DOING WHAT I TOLD YOU TO DO!” Isn’t that just a new Moses? Even to have him say: “Look, I even died for you. Now go and do thou likewise” is not really Gospel. [Yes, this is acting like a narcotics-trained dog, “sniffing” for the Gospel.] Pointing to his crucifixion—for all of us LBPs—as paradigm for what we too should do is not yet preaching THE Gospel. It’s “using” Christ for ethics without “using” him for his own primary, and primal, agenda, his “opus proprium” in Lutheran confessional lingo. That primal agenda arises at the God-and-LBP interface.

But to get to that primal use of Christ, you have to go to that “coram deo” interface, the jugular of what the dilemma is. Which I didn’t hear from Sunday’s preacher. That’s D-3 (diagnosis level three): the deepest malady of all LBPs is their (our) God-problem.

Back to the parable. Long before LBP wound up in Hades there was “a great gulf fixed” between him and God’s turf, the place where Abraham’s at home. [Btw, “Lazarus” (Lo-azar in Hebrew) is “no help.” I.e., not only that he can’t help himself, but also that he GETS “no help” from us LBPs.] The chasm twixt LBPs and God is indeed unbridgeable—at least from our side. All LBPs are “no-help” for themselves, nor for others, to span that gap. But we can, and are, blinded by this ultimate fact of life. Only from the end in retrospect did it become perfectly clear for LBP in Hades. Whereupon it’s too late. Then LBP pleads for mercy. But he didn’t live by mercy before, so why now? Merciless living before the end equals the same for the hereafter.

Jesus puts into the story a line about “Moses and the prophets.” Not that Moses and the prophets can bridge the gap either. But when read “unveiled” (as St. Paul notes) they make that chasm perfectly clear. If you don’t “listen to Moses and the prophets,” you won’t have a clue about the chasm. And thus the One raised from the dead, this Lazarus-like Jesus, will be of no interest to you. Not really “necessary.” And if/when you do “listen to them” while you are living, you’ll also start your mercy-plea while you’re yet alive. “God, be merciful to me a sinner” is the full text. And to such a plea, the God of the Bible is notoriously attentive. He actually initiates chasm-crossing. That’s what the Jesus story is all about.

Had the preacher taken us to this depth diagnosis of our own LBP malady, he’d have had US pleading too for God’s mercy. And then he could have really gossiped us. The Jesus that came “too soon” in the sermon would now be “necessitated” as the Lutheran Confessions like to say. Necessitated as no one else could be—one who has entered Hades in his own death and risen from that death in triumph over it. That means triumph over the God-gap, the chasm that is the bottom-line torment of all LBPs.

That also means “necessitated” according to the specs of the “double dipstick” of Apology 4 in the Lutheran Confessions—1) using Christ for the big job that he alone can do—call it forgiveness—getting God and sinners together again in friendship across that chasm, and 2) giving us tormented LBPs the comfort and confidence that our God-gap is bridged. Which then gives us the courage to be Christ’s own little Lazaruses—helpless helpers, wounded healers—living from mercy as the new-breath we inhale, and exuding that same mercy as the odor and fragrance of our daily journey.

The primal use of the Gospel always aims to bridge the God-gap.

The second use of the Gospel bridges the Lazarus-gap.

It's the grammar of Gospel-imperatives: SINCE Christ became God's Lazarus for us, THEREFORE you be his Lazarus to the Lazaruses in your world.

And remember the LBPs are the ones most help-less, really "Lo-azar." They need big help. But that help is here. His name is Jesus.

Real heresy is to keep LBPs ignorant of the big help they need, and then to feed them an emaciated Jesus for the shallow diagnosis. In this sense Gospel-sniffer and heresy-hunter may be synonyms.

Isn't this depth diagnosis and resurrection resource exactly what Luke's Jesus is telling us in this parable? What else could be better news than Christ the God-gap-spanner? And that good news could make a congregation gutsy enough to take maybe just half of their 10 million dollars and give it to some Lazarus Foundation. Imagine who all would benefit from that, both among the LBPs and the obvious Lo-azar types! Imagine how many chasms—yes how many of the BIG ones, the D-3s – might be bridged!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder