

Abounding in Hope

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ABSTRACT

The “abounding in hope” theme of Romans 15: 13 can address the boundaries of hope the Christian faith community experiences in the divisions between those strong and those weak in faith. In the setting of the Epistle, in fact, it is to this division the apostle is speaking, commending boundary-breaking hope for both weak and strong. In a similar way, two Pauline students, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Martin Luther picked up on the apostle’s insights about hope grounded in faith in the Gospel. King led civil rights workers through a “purification” process of self-discernment to enable workers to see how well they could set aside their rights of “strength” for the sake of loving and forgiving the oppressor and Luther withheld the counsel of the strong for the sake of the weaker faith of the German people preparing to defend themselves against invasion by papal and imperial forces in 1530-1531. Taking their cue from the Apostle Paul, King and Luther looked to their free-wheeling rabbi Lord in the Gospel who had set aside all his rights to the universe for the sake of breaking the bounds of merciful hope toward sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike. Appropriating that same insight today, we can notice, too, how the Holying Spirit, the Holy Gust, the divine Second Wind can blow with enough hope for all, allowing the strong to withhold the strength of their claims for the sake of the weaker sister and brother so that faith can be enlarged all the more for strong and weak together, breathing the same en-spirited, blessed air. (Stephen C. Krueger)

FIRST PART

Read Romans 15:13. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

I.

There is a seminary professor I know, a fine preacher, who used to tell a powerful story. Used to. His story illustrated the lengths to which Christ went in our behalf. The trouble was, in order for the story to make its point it had to use language which some people might find shocking. Few preachers could tell that story and get away with it. I do know of one other preacher who tried, but with tragic results. She was one of the professor's students, a young seminarian on her internship. The preaching occasion on which she tried telling her professor's story turned out to be so traumatic for her that she almost quit her pastoral calling. As she later told me in tears, her sermon not only fell flat, it came off as tacky, even offensive. One of the elders tried consoling her with Mark Twain's famous line, "Ma'am, you had all the right words but not the right music."

The intern herself had a better diagnosis of what went wrong. "My prof could tell the story," she said, "because he believed in it. I was telling it just for effect. He could use the expression 'go to hell' with a clear conscience but when I said that I didn't feel right about it." Now I happen to know from that professor that, since that time, he has never used the story again except under the most guarded circumstances. That is a loss. But he did that for a greater gain.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans he was addressing a similar situation. In the congregation at Rome there were some Christians, perhaps Jewish ones, who for

religious reasons did not feel right about eating the same strong meat and drinking the same strong drink (like using the same strong language) as the world did. Also they felt that certain holy days deserved special respect. By contrast there were others in the congregation, perhaps Gentiles, who so enjoyed their new freedom in the gospel that they ate and drink without such restrictions and treated each day of the week as freely as the next.

Was the difference between the two lifestyles serious? Paul did not think so. At any rate, that was not the problem. Something else was. Meanwhile Paul put the best construction on both groups. Both of them in their own way, he said, behaved as they did "in honor of the Lord." (14:6) The one lifestyle, which emphasized restraint, dramatizes one important feature of our Lord, how he calls us to die to the world. The other group's lifestyle complements that with our Lord's corollary stress on resurrection and fullness of life. So if it's living we do, we do that to the Lord, and if it's dying we do, we also do that to the Lord. For the Lord is lord of both, of dying and of living. (14:8.9)

Well, then, if this honest difference between two Christian lifestyles was not the problem, what was? It was that the difference between them was being squelched, squelched by the stronger of the two groups and to the hurt of the weaker: to the hurt not just of the weaker ones' pride or of their ethnic traditions but to the hurt of their faith. The weaker ones in this case, those whose faith was not so strong, were the stricter of the two groups. We might call them the conservatives if we promise not to think ill of them because of that. Evidently within the Roman congregation, being conservative was no longer "in," no longer the dominant style. Instead these weaker members, so-called, were being pressured ever so subtly to comply with the other group's freer lifestyle even though

inwardly they could not honestly feel right about doing so. Nor could they believe that God felt right about it. They found themselves having to go along with, possibly even voting for a kind of behavior which, so they believed, displeased God.

And they were correct, says Paul. If that is what they believed, then they did indeed – they did! – displease God. “Happy is the person,” says Paul, “who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, because he is not acting out of faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” (14:22,23) It is like the young intern I described, forcing into her sermon the loaded expression “go to hell” merely because that had worked elsewhere, though she herself, as she said so well, did not “feel right” about it. And because she did not “feel right” about it, that is exactly what she was; not “right,” not a “right” person for doing that. Perhaps her professor’s provocative expression still struck her as profane or as crude or as macho or as just not “her.” Whatever, Paul would agree, if what she did she did “without faith,” then what she did was “sin.” How sensitive of her to perceive that. No wonder she is today such a superb pastor.

That reminds me of Martin Luther King, Jr., who as a good Baptist preacher knew his Bible and followed Paul’s example in his own dealings with the “weak” and the “strong.” Dr. King and other staff members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference used to spend hours getting people ready, spiritually ready, before they went out on the streets for their non-violent demonstrations. These were not just locker-room pep talks to get the marchers pumped up. By no means. It was a strenuous process of self-examination. It was called “purification:” Can you go out there and endure taunts and stone-throwing and being spit upon without striking back? Can you be hated and not hate in return? Can you stand to be cursed and still respond with good

cheer and say to the cursers, "Peace, brother," "Peace, sister?" That was not everyone's cup of tea. There were dedicated, well-meaning activists who wanted fiercely to join the demonstrations but who could not qualify under that stringent criterion of The Sermon on the Mount.

They failed the test not just because they were too angry or lacking in self-control. That might have been part of it. But basically these were folks who were still too deeply scarred inside by what the black spirituals called "nobodyness," a haunting sense of their own worthlessness instilled in them by centuries of white indignities. They had not yet been liberated enough by that opposite freedom which the gospel of Jesus brings, what Dr. King called the gospel of "somebodyness."

Consequently, they were not yet strong enough to go out and shoulder the cross of hatred, feeling right about that or as Paul would say, doing it "in faith." They were not all that convinced that such cross-bearing, apparently so passive and slavish, could be pleasing to God. So, for them, it would not be God-pleasing; for them it would be sin. In their case, therefore, Dr. King would find something else for them to do, something they could do in good faith, like helping to get out the mailings. King appreciated the biblical insight, "Whatever is done without faith is sin." And he cared too much for his friends' faith to overburden it further.

II.

But now notice something from this example, also from Paul's example with the Romans. These "weak ones," as they were called by "the strong," were not the ones on whom Paul laid the burden of responsibility. No, the burden was on "the strong." Paul concentrates his attention not on those whose faith is too weak to live the bolder lifestyle. Rather he concentrates on the

others, those who can live such a bold life with good conscience, with strong faith.

For that of course, for their strong faith, Paul does not fault them. But he does fault them for something else. Whether they mean to or not, these strong ones, so-called, are browbeating or one-upping or shaming the weaker ones into conformity with themselves. It is the free spirits in the congregation, those among whom Paul includes himself (15:1), the meat-eaters and wine- drinkers and sabbath-skippers and seminary professors whom Paul singles out for correction. They are not as strong as they may think, not if they insist on what they by themselves have a right to – on what “pleases ourselves,” as Paul says (15:1) – yet in the process cause sisters and brothers to stumble.

As for myself, Paul says, “I know and I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your [sister or] brother is being hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.” (14:14,15) A little later Paul adds, “Everything is indeed clean [kosher] but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what they eat” (14:20) or drink or by how freely they observe the sabbath or by the colorful language they use with their seminarians. I think that is why the professor stopped telling his favorite story, priceless gospel though it was, so long as it set a precedent his students could not emulate in good faith.

III.

If the strong faith that you have overtakes the weaker faith of the others, then, says Paul, “the faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.” (14:22) What! But then, dear Paul, comes back the objection from the strong, if I do take what is

my Christian right and keep it strictly to myself and God and away from the weaklings, am I not limiting my Christian freedom? Well, now, says Paul, is that all it is, limiting? Isn't it also a way of enlarging your freedom? So free are you in Christ that you are free even to conceal your freedom from those who might be weakened by it. But in that case, the objector replies, I would not be coming out of the closet with who I really am. I would be one person privately before God and I would pretend to be somebody else before my weak neighbors.

Oh, says Paul, I rather suspect that your weak neighbors, as we call them, already have a pretty good hunch about how strongly you believe and the lifestyle you enjoy; they do prefer that you not make an issue of it. All I was asking is that you spare them the miserable conflict of having to give approval, even tacit approval, to something they cannot truly justify. That puts them in conflict with God. Spare them that, please. You probably could extort their outward approval by means of your superior arguments or by making them appear bigoted. I am asking you not to flaunt your freedom if in the process you undo the painstaking handiwork of the Holy Spirit, your neighbor's faith. (14:20) Instead, why not show how strong you really are in this case by keeping your strong faith to yourself, yourself and God?

It must have been something like that that motivated Martin Luther, one winter, to keep his faith to himself and God. It was the winter of 1530-1531. At that moment his whole Reformation appeared to be doomed. His opponents, the pope and the emperor, were mobilizing their military forces on the border, preparing to invade and to wipe out the reform movement with the sword once and for all. On this side of the border were the German people who had experienced the new liberation of the gospel in their lands. Though they were no match for the emperor's superior forces, they and their princes were determined to resist the impending invasion, to the death if necessary.

Luther, too, knew that resistance of some kind was inevitable but his strong personal conviction was that the resistance should be non-violent. What was strong about his conviction was that he trusted that God could somehow use even such non-violent resistance to protect the people and their gospel. The people, however, and their civil government did not share Luther's strong faith. They were, shall I say, more conservative. By contrast with Luther they believed they would have to defend themselves by force. In the language of Paul's Epistle to the Romans they were "the weak," I suppose, and Luther was more like "the strong."

But following Paul's advice, Luther finally decided to keep his own bolder options to himself – himself and God – though he would not have had to do that had there been only himself to consider. Knowing Luther you can imagine how hard that was for him to bite his tongue and keep mum about his convictions. Still, that is what he did. This time, he said, I will put my pen back in its sheath – I will turn off my computer – and I shall not impose my own position upon the church even though I believe it to be truer to the gospel.

And why will he remain silent? Because when the invasion comes and the people will have to resist one way or the other, it is all important that they be able to do their resisting with good consciences, without constantly second-guessing themselves and wondering whether they shouldn't have listened to Luther instead. In short, they should not be made to act against their own belief that what they are doing pleases God. For Paul was right, "Whatever is done without faith is sin." And Martin Luther, like his famous descendant, Martin Luther King, Jr., had no wish to weaken his oppressed people's faith even farther.

This does place a strain upon the strong ones, what with their wonderfully free faith and yet having to keep their freedom from

public view out of consideration for others. I can imagine a bishop, for instance, who after a hectic couple of weeks on the road decides to skip church just this one Sunday morning and celebrates his freedom in Christ by slipping out and playing golf. But then what happens, once he gets out there, is that he shoots a hole-in-one. Consider his dilemma: whom can he tell? If he did tell, not only would he give himself away. What is worse, he may tempt others to follow his example but, in their case, with guilty consciences. So what does he do? Being truly strong, he does what Paul advises, keeps his strong faith to himself and God, though I'm sure, knowing golfers, that does not come easily.

IV.

May I tell you about another case in point, this one more delicate? There are these two middle-aged men, musicians, who have been living together for several years now. In the Christian congregation to which they belong nothing is ever said about their being gay, either by the men themselves or by their fellow-parishioners. Officially and publicly the question does not come up. It is not that the parishioners don't have their own private theories about the situation. They do. However, because the two men are such great favorites within the congregation everyone, the men included, would prefer to keep it that way and let well enough alone. As a result, no one really knows for sure whether the two men are in fact practicing homosexuals.

The congregation, I am told, is just as happy not knowing that. That way, the parishioners, who love these two brothers in Christ, don't have to pretend to love their way of life, since they honestly don't know what it is. True, this particular congregation, traditionalist though it is, probably could be intimidated into pretending to accept the two men as gays if it

came down to doing that rather than losing them. But as it is, the congregation is spared such a schizophrenic decision. And why? Because the two men do not insist, "Love us, love our lifestyle" – a lifestyle which, blessedly, remains an unknown. Not even the priest knows. Or if he knows, he is not telling.

However, two or three years ago that tacit agreement, for such it is, threatened to come apart. That was when the present priest arrived on the scene. Quickly he came to know and like these two musicians and, almost as quickly, jumped to his own conclusion that they must be living in a sexual union. Because he meant well and wanted everything to be open and above board, he hatched a plan for them – the priest did – although his wife tried to discourage him from that. He was going to urge the men to come forward with their secret. He would assure them of his own backing, to the point of urging the congregation to endorse their union, maybe even solemnizing it with a nuptial ceremony.

The marvel is that it was the two men themselves who, sensing what the new priest was up to, thanked him but very firmly talked him out of his plan. If they actually did have a secret, said they, they would rather have it kept that way, a secret. Even if it were a secret which everybody knew, better that it should be known by everyone as just that, as a secret. (That is, if there really was a secret in the first place.) For then nobody has to stand up and say yes to something he or she cannot honestly justify. That, said they, – namely, standing up and saying yes – is the sort of thing you do only if "you can look God straight in the eye." "Only if you can look God straight in the eye": isn't that like what Paul was saying, Only if you can do it with faith? And if you cannot do it with faith, it is sin. So, why foist something on people against their faith?

Anyway, said the two men to the priest, didn't the congregation already have a precedent for this sort of secret-keeping? Isn't

there Mrs. So-and-so, a widow, who had inherited a large fortune, about which everybody knows yet about which everybody also respects her desire to keep the information private? As the priest told me, he was utterly persuaded by the case the men made. What's more, good sport that he is, he thanked them for the theology they had taught him.

As you might expect, word about their conversation with the priest must have leaked out. For not long after, the widow whom I mentioned, one of the most conservative members of the parish, came and thanked the two men. She did that ever so discreetly. She simply thanked them for having been so helpful to the new priest. Then she handed them a sizable donation for the church organ, which they were rebuilding. They reciprocated by having her over for supper. Then she had them over in return. And so on. This has given the congregation more than enough to talk about, not at all maliciously but affectionately and beaming from ear to ear.

You understand of course, the story is not about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality but about something at least as important, how strong believers can restrain their own freedom, keeping it to themselves and God if that gives others "all peace and joy in believing."

V.

That, sisters and brothers, is what our verse from Paul's Epistle to the Romans is about, though you might never have guessed that looking simply at this single verse, Romans 15:13. For publicity purposes we have had to abbreviate it even more drastically into a short convention slogan, showing only the verse's last three words, "abounding in hope." But what Paul means by "abounding" is that our hope should exceed our own selfish bounds. Hope should not be bounded, limited to merely

what “pleases ourselves.” The Jerusalem Bible translates the phrase, not “abounding in hope” but rather “that the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope.” And few things so bind and constrict the hope of the Christian community as when believers, especially strong believers, flaunt their right to live as they choose in disregard of others whose faith is less bold than theirs. That puts the weaker believers in a bind, a bind actually with God.

On the other hand, it is possible to be so strong in your faith that you can accommodate yourself to the more fragile, brittle faith of others for their own new peace and joy. That, says Paul, is being like Christ our Lord. For he gamely consented to be, of all things, a Jew, a member of that strict, law-conscious people, “the circumcised.” Now that takes a mighty big God, to rein in his boundless freedom over all creation and downscale it to such human, conservative, legal proportions as those of Israel. Yet wasn’t that exactly how this free-wheeling rabbi Jesus sprang loose God’s mercy way beyond Israel, by first of all respecting and adapting to Israel’s legalities? Just look at what all resulted from his humble keeping of that law. The promises to his ancestors, once these promises were finally kept in Jesus the Jew, no longer had to be kept within the rigorous boundaries of Judaism. Now those promises could spread out to other ethnic groups, to such lawless ruffraff as the pagan Germans and Scandinavians and Africans and Hispanics and Asians, the likes of you and me. (15:3-12)

And now for the likes of us, in turn, to become the likes of Christ to other weaker believers than ourselves is being “strong” indeed. Isn’t that like what we used to call isometric exercise, increasing your strength by restraining your strength – in this case, increasing your strength for others by restraining your strength for yourselves? That is being super-strong, Paul would say, with the “strength of [Christ’s own]

Holying Spirit.” This side of the resurrection, you cannot get much stronger than that.

More on this tomorrow.

SECOND PART

Reread Romans 15:13. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the strength of the Holying Spirit you may exceed all bounds to hope.” (alternative translation)

Paul prays for “strength” for whom? For “the strong,” for those in the Roman congregation who already are strong in faith. But then these strong believers must not yet be strong enough. Right. Their strength, impressive as it is, needs to be more radically “holied,” hallowed by the Holying Spirit. What does that mean? Put it another way. Paul prays for “hope” for whom? For the same “strong” ones, those in the congregation who are already strong in hope. The trouble is, their hope is bounded, restricted, fenced in. Their hope, strong as it is, is limited to what pleases them. Limited to their lifestyle, limited to their Christian rights and their Christian freedoms, never minding the contrary lifestyles of others in the congregation. But because the strong ones do have strength, influence, consequently their preferences tend to become binding also for “the weak.” This puts the weak in a bind, a bind with God. For they are now being intimidated into a style of life which they, unlike the strong, cannot honestly practice, “looking God straight in the eye.” So then why do the strong need the greater strength of the Holying Spirit? To restrain their own hopes so that their one real hope, their holy hope, may go bounding beyond themselves, bringing also to the weak “all joy and peace in believing.”

I.

Now I hope I don't need to be reminded that there is also the opposite danger. That is, those whose faith is too weak to swing with the full freedom of the gospel may actually use their weakness as a form of spiritual blackmail, as a club to intimidate the stronger ones into submission, thus replacing the gospel's freedom with the old slavery of the law. Paul himself faced that opposite problem in another congregation, in Galatia, where the Judaizers insisted on perpetuating the legal practice of circumcision. Similarly, that was the problem Luther was up against when the reactionaries in the Roman church tried enforcing a works righteousness that smothered faith. Likewise M. L. King, Jr., was stonewalled by the white church establishment, including its white liberals, who insisted there was only one thing he could do: wait. In Hitler's Germany, when anti-semitic church members refused to accept Christian pastors of Jewish descent and when church leaders hesitated to intervene against these antisemitic weaklings, then one Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, stood up and protested.

I, too, know something of this tyranny of the weak, if I may presume to cite my own case, a case which was shared by many of you in this assembly. Yes, there are times when Christians with strict (or restricted) consciences resort to seizing church power in order to force their weakness upon the very liberty of the gospel. Such a time, if it comes, is what the Lutheran reformers called "a time for confessing," a time to take the witness stand and to testify even against the church's highest authorities if necessary, and a time of course to take the consequences of one's witness.

However, such dramatic times of martyrdom, let me emphasize, are strictly exceptional and are to be avoided if at all possible. In fact, such times are to be prayed against, "Save us from the

time of trial." On the other hand, what is not exceptional but altogether usual in the day to day, hum-drum church of Christ is the far less dramatic, far less heroic situation which Paul encountered in the church at Rome. I refer to that commonplace circumstance in the church where the strong need to be strong not against the weak but for the sake of the weak, so strong in fact as to regulate their own rights so that the peace and joy of others might be deregulated, unbound, unbounded.

Such strength toward the weak, I must admit, does not come naturally to some of us. The heroics of the confessors posture have always seemed more attractive. Maybe that is why Bishop Maahs, a wise pastor, put me to work on this text, a text I would never have chosen. But now that it has been chosen for me, thank you, I have been reminded all over again that any confessor who cannot first of all restrain his or her strong faith in the service of weaker believers and has not first of all exhausted every recourse for the sake of these weak ones has no business being a confessor against them.

II.

Consider the following story. This time my source is from Minnesota, Pastor Steven Kuhl. Imagine a Lutheran farmer name of Jenson (not his real name.) Like the other farmers around him Jenson was deeply in debt, except that he was moreso. He was downright insolvent, so much did his debits outweigh his assets. So insolvent was he, in fact, that the bank which held his loan did not dare to foreclose on him. For the land and the property which would have been repossessed in any foreclosure, when resold at today's market values, would not have been enough to cover Jenson's debt. The bank would only have been jeopardizing its own precarious solvency. You have heard it said, If you owe the bank a thousand dollars you have a problem, if you owe it a million dollars the bank has a problem. That is how it was with

Jenson and his bank. So instead of a foreclosure, part of Jenson's debt was "forgiven " as people up there would call it, though I understand that strictly speaking it is not forgiveness but a complicated system of refinancing. Anyway, Jenson kept his farm, temporarily.

Meanwhile, however, many of Jenson's neighbors, precisely because they were not as badly off as he was, were being foreclosed. I am not enough of a financier to explain that. But I can understand the bitterness that created – bitterness against the whole system and even, I suppose, against God. In the next county there was a suicide. Folks were being forced to leave farms that had been in their families for generations. Or the farms they were staying and working were no longer their own. Neighbors complained, saying, Maybe we should have done what Jenson did, let the bank talk us into borrowing as wildly as he did back in the seventies. Not that they actually would have wanted to do that. That would have been against their principles. They could not have done that, as Paul says "with faith." For them that would have been "sin."

Jenson and his wife were also being sorely tried. But they were surviving, especially spiritually. They were facing up to the truth. They fully understood why the bank had refinanced their farm. It wasn't that they were special. It was simply for the bank's own protection. Given the economic and legal realities, the Jensons were within their rights. What is more, they were growing in faith. They were learning all over again to trust that Christ would bring something good out of all this, and not just for themselves. So they would not have had to apologize for keeping their farm. Nor did they apologize. They did something better, stronger.

With the help of their adult son they worked round the clock to find ways of inching their farm back up to a level of minimal

solvency, finally to a level where the bank could do what all along it had needed to do, repossess the Jenson farm. That put the Jensons out in the cold with their neighbors, which is where they felt more at home. But that is not all. At last report, the Jensons and their neighbors had begun to do something unprecedented in that neighborhood, pool their energies and their modest resources in hopes of recovering, together – together improving their farming methods, maybe together acquiring an interest in the local bank, maybe someday even buying the farms back one by one. Something like that.

In any case, what the story is really about is hope, enough hope to go around, enough hope not just for the Jensons but for the whole neighborhood. Hope abounding! The Jensons did not insist on living the style they might have had a right to. They did not assert their freedom at the expense of others but accommodated themselves to where their neighbors were, to where their neighbors' weaker faith was but to adapt themselves to the weakened condition of their neighbors must have taken a stronger faith than ever. That is how the Jensons' hope "abounded."

III.

Really this abounding was the Holying Spirit bounding with hope across "all bounds" the way the wind overleaps farmers' fences by leaps and bounds. The Spirit refused to be confined within the narrow boundaries of the Jensons' farm, anymore than a Kansas tornado would be. Does the fresh wind from the west blow only within the lot-lines of Jensons' property? Of course not. Does the northwind allow itself to be trapped inside Jensons' fences and windbreaks? Hardly. Then why should the Holying Spirit, the Pentecostal Life-Breath of God, our Second Wind allow herself to be so confined? Of course she does not.

It is this holying, hallowing, healing Spirit for whom Paul is

praying in Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all peace and joy in believing." "Believing," Paul is saying, is like breathing. Believing is breathing in the peace and joy with which the Spirit wants to "fill" your lungs and heart and soul. You are breathers, you believers, and the fresh wind you are meant to inhale is the peace and joy from the God of hope.

Notice, however, Paul is praying that the Spirit "fill you with all peace and joy in believing," all of it, not just enough for yourself, not just your private share of the peace, not just your personal quota of joy, not just sufficient peace and joy to fill your own lungs. No, the peace and joy from the Holying Spirit cannot be divided up that way, anymore than the westwind can. It is all one big wind, whole and indivisible, not lots of separate little acres of wind: not Jenson's piece of the wind and Halvorsen's hundred cubic feet of wind and Gonzalez' lower lefthand corner of wind. The selfsame wind which Gonzalez breathes belongs also to the Washingtons and to the Kongs and to the Bernsteins. In the same way the peace and joy which blow in from the God of hope are no one believer's private property. All of the peace is for each believer, and each believer has access to the whole joy. For it is all one Holying Spirit.

Therefore, let not the strong believers, the heavy breathers, suppose that the large gulps of peace and joy which they suck in are merely theirs, and that the weak believers, the sniffers, must then be content with what skimpy whiffs of peace and joy happen to be left over, or that the weak breathers have to settle for what the strong ones breathe back out, halitosis and all. No, there may have to be some strong breath which you keep to yourself, yourself and God, which like strong meat and strong drink and strong language and strong lifestyle could be offensive to more sensitive breathers. To show how strong your respiration really is, try holding it a bit and downscaling it to the sniffers' rate of intake. You'll be amazed at what that

does for the atmosphere. Nowadays we have all been admonished not to inflict passive smoking on others. Paul, in effect, is urging us not to inflict passive “peace and joy” on others, our private strong brands of peace and joy, to which other breathers may be allergic.

So when Paul prays, “May the God of hope fill you with all peace and joy in believing,” he is not saying merely, May God fill you, each by each, one at a time, with nothing but peace and joy. Much more than that, he is saying, May God fill all of you – y’all, sniffers and heavy breathers together – with that one and the same, all-pleasing peace and joy which like the wind belongs simultaneously to all its breathers, not just to the strong ones, and can exhilarate even the feeblest, weakest tastes. So if as you breathe in that peace and joy and especially as you breathe it back out, you can say, That’s the Spirit, that’s the Holy Gust, that’s the healing Second Wind, on which the sisters and brothers downwind from me, even those with tender sinuses or with scar tissue on their lungs will not choke or cough but will thrive and swell with life, then Paul’s prayer in Romans 15:13 will have been answered. And think what you will have done for the environment.

IV.

Isn’t that what we in our congregations act out on Sunday mornings when we come to that point in the service called “The Exchange of Peace” or “Passing The Peace” or just “The Peace”? I mean, aren’t we thereby saying to one another, Here, sisters and brothers, is a peace which, though it is also mine, is every bit as much yours – therefore, enjoy? Now I know that that wonderful moment in the liturgy, at least so I think it is, has not always been equally welcomed by all believers. In fact, when the practice of passing the peace was first being introduced among us, twenty to thirty years ago, there was, as some of you will

recall, a good bit of resistance.

Thelda, my wife, recently reminded me of that. She is a librarian and, to help me prepare this presentation, she showed me a clipping from Ann Landers' column dated less than four years ago. One of the letter-writers that day, identified as a Lutheran, was obviously upset. "Here in the East," said the angry letter, "it is show-biz time in the Lutheran church. We are asked to 'pass the peace.' People from all sides grab your hand, mutter 'peace be with you,' and the scene resembles a fruit basket upset. . . You might as well be in an amusement park." (Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 1 1/16/'87)

I picture the offended Lutheran who wrote that letter as one of those who in Paul's congregation in Rome might have been called "the weak," that is, so called by others who thought of themselves as "the strong." "The strong" in this situation would then be those other Lutherans who, as the letter claims, when "we are asked to 'pass the peace,' . . . [come at you] from all sides, grab your hand, mutter 'peace be with you'" and generally make a scene which "resembles a fruit basket upset." At least so it seems to this stricter, more traditional Lutheran. He, I suppose, goes along with the "fruit basket upset," maybe even forces a smile as he does so, but enjoys the experience not one bit. In fact, not only does he not feel right about it, the whole transaction strikes him as sacrilegious, displeasing to God. As Paul would say, this believer cannot do what he does "with faith," hence what he does – what he does – is "sin."

On the other hand, how about "the strong?" Theirs is the kind of robust faith, I am speculating, which allows them to welcome this new freedom in the liturgy, the freedom to greet one another as itself a part of the Eucharist. And the more neighborly they are about it, the more they feel they have caught the Spirit. So engrossed are they by what they themselves

find pleasing that they fail to notice this stray, wounded believer who does not share their exuberance. Or if they do notice him, they may regard him as a wet blanket or a stick-in-the-mud. It might never occur to them that by such an apparently harmless ceremony they are, as Paul says, causing "the ruin of one for whom Christ died," (14:15) possibly even driving him away from the beloved company. His only recourse, at least the only one his weak faith allows, is to complain to Ann Landers. There he gets a hearing.

I take Paul to be saying, there is a third way, which is neither the way of the offended "weak" nor the way of the self-pleasing "strong." Nor is it merely some wimpish compromise between the two. On the contrary, it is the truly strong way of the Holying Spirit, whereby the strong use their strength not against the weak but for the weak. In this present case, what might that third way be? Obviously I have no infallible answer to that question. But I can cite an experience (not my own) which deals with just such a disagreement within a Lutheran congregation concerning the passing of The Peace.

Two factions in the congregation had reached a stalemate. The one side said they were all in favor of Christians greeting one another but that that should be saved for the fellowship hour after the service. The other side countered by saying, what better place to greet one another than in the church service where God greets us? Both sides, I suppose, had a point, though "the strong" probably had a stronger "theological" point. We usually do. However, even "the strong" in this case were making the same faulty assumption that "the weak" were making. Both sides were assuming that the passing of The Peace is basically an occasion for greetings. After all, didn't they all shake hands, some even hugging and kissing? Didn't some of them say, not "peace be with you" but "good morning" or "how are you" or even sneak in a quick conversation?

In fact, that seems to have been the very thing that “the strong” liked about the ritual, that it was a greeting, and the very thing “the weak” disliked, that stopping to chat with one another broke the spell of worship. The impasse between the two groups had worsened to the point where one of the so-called “weak” would stay seated during The Peace, with his eyes closed, and would not join in. He at least was still coming to church, which his wife had stopped doing.

The parishioner who came to the rescue was herself one of “the strong,” a young woman, a travel agent by profession. In a Sunday morning adult class devoted to the subject she spoke up. She was so nervous she stood up. She began by apologizing for her accent. She told about her childhood days in her parents’ home, a Lutheran home in Czechoslovakia. On Sunday mornings after the family had finished breakfast and before they headed off to church, they would rise from the breakfast table, say aloud The Confession of Sin together and then would turn to one another, parents as well as children, and each would speak to the other the forgiveness of sin. Then they would go to church. Said the young woman, that was before she had ever encountered the exchange of peace in the church service. When that practice was later introduced, she said, she simply assumed that what the worshipers were doing when they said “the peace of the Lord be with you” was forgiving one another – the way her family had done back home. Then she sat down.

The class was moved by what the young woman told them. They asked their pastor to tell them more. The pastor went back to the books. He also got on the phone with an old seminary professor and then returned to the congregation with what he had learned. He even preached about the subject. It seems the old Slovak Lutherans were onto something, said the preacher. The passing of The Peace, while it does have an element of greeting about it, is not meant primarily as a greeting. Primarily it is

Christians forgiving one another now that God in Christ has forgiven them. You will notice, by the way, that the worshipers speak their forgiving Peace to one another well after the pastor has pronounced forgiveness on them all as the spokesperson for Christ. Our pastor, by the way, Pastor Janet Peele, opens every service with The Confession of Sin and The Absolution and then later on, when we get to the passing of The Peace, she says, "Let us share a sign of this Peace with one another" – this Peace, I presume, which we had all received a moment before from Christ in The Absolution.

Similarly the preacher in that other, troubled congregation went on to explain. You will notice, he said, that we speak The Peace, the forgiveness to one another immediately before we all come forward for The Holy Communion. That reminds us, he said, of what our Lord once taught us, If you still have unfinished business with some sister or brother, first be reconciled with them and then come to the altar. The passing of The Peace, said the preacher, recalls one of the major themes of the Reformation, the universal priesthood of all believers. We are all priests to one another. It is what Luther once called "the mutual conversation and consolation of the [sisters and] brothers." It is mutual absolution.

Well, that did it. So I am told. Parishioners on both sides of the controversy were moved to reconsider. Even those who had been most resistive to the passing of The Peace had to admit, at least to themselves, that if what is going on here is forgiveness of sin, nothing could be more churchly than that. And that would not be the sort of thing to reserve for the fellowship hour in the church basement. "The strong" ones likewise could feel better than ever about this new feature in the liturgy. It was better even than greeting one another, which really anyone can do. This was doing what Christ does, forgiving and restoring.

During the week following the preacher's sermon, someone in the congregation made a phone call. The caller was the man who, as I mentioned, had been quietly boycotting the passing of The Peace by sitting it out in his pew. Whom did he phone? He phoned the young Slovak- American woman. Why did he phone her? I am only guessing that it was because he knew strong faith when he saw it. True, he called the woman's home number during the day, when he probably knew she would be away at the office. But he did leave a message on her message recorder. I know, that might not seem to be as up-front and forthright as you would like. But don't knock it. For the message he left was this: "This is Jack Miller (or whatever his name was) from church; Lydia and I just wanted to say, 'The Peace of the Lord be with you.'" The young woman returned The Peace the following Sunday, in person, richly accented.

Isn't that how, in the real church, hope is abounding?

Robert.W. Bertram, 6/7-8/'91

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