

Another One from the Archives: Bob Bertram Requiem

Colleagues,

Marie and I moved on Monday. Better said, “were” moved. By a crew of nine, family and friends with a beeeeg U-Haul and the smarts about the task to be done. To Hidden Lake Senior Living Community under the umbrella of Lutheran Senior Services. [Go to <http://lssliving.org/> for the full skinny. The fact that the CEO, John R. Kotovsky, took a few Crossings courses when he was younger doesn’t hurt.] We now live in suburban north St. Louis, a half-hour drive from our old digs in midtown. As you can imagine, the realities of a 50% space reduction are still being worked out. And there is fallout. E.g., from those file cabinets, with papers such as this one, my words at Bob Bertram’s funeral May 22, 2003.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

RWB REQUIEM

At Luther’s funeral, Philip Melanchthon was the preacher. His most poignant words were: “Most of all I thank God for Martin Luther because he taught me the Gospel.”

Bob Bertram taught me the Gospel. Many of you here are saying the same. For me it started 55 years ago – I was 18 – when he was my teacher at Valparaiso University. Bob was in the philosophy department, but that’s where theology was being done. Valpo’s mad genius president O.P.Kretzmann had hired Bob – along

with other young hotshots like Jaroslav Pelikan and Dick Luecke (all in the philosophy dept.) – to put meat on the bones of the University’s vision to join Athens and Jerusalem. “High academic scholarship and high religion,” as OP liked to call it. But the blueprint was fuzzy. So the hotshots were called in to work it out.

After Pelikan and Luecke moved to other callings, Bob stayed on (a total of 15 years) to work out that blueprint. He pulled it straight from the theology of the Lutheran Reformation, actually straight from Luther–his debate with Erasmus and his Galatians commentary–the focus of his doctoral work at the University of Chicago. The blueprint was actually simple. For reading the Bible it is the law/Gospel lenses. For reading the world and for acting in the world it’s the same lenses: God’s law at work to care for that world and God’s Gospel promise to redeem it. For the last 30 years he called it Crossings.

After Bob was my college teacher in the 1940s, I later joined him as teaching colleague at Valpo. We worked on the blueprint together, and as he sometimes said, the two of us have been “joined at the hip” ever since. At Concordia Seminary, at Seminex, and in the Crossings Community he founded.

Bob had thousands of students during his years of teaching. And surprising as it may sound, that number increases even though he has died. Bob’s theological paradigm has a website. Law/promise theology as we learned it from Bob gets posted each week on the Crossings website. The response grows and grows. It’s now nearly 1200 “hits” each day That’s almost one per minute. Last year 59,000 different folks (from well over 100 different countries) visited the website to check out law/promise theology.

Bob and I were buddies. That’s his word. Seminex colleague Andy Weyermann said we were like the Lone Ranger and Tonto. [Later I

learned what “tonto” really meant, namely, simple-minded.] Even so, Bob could talk the language of the University of Chicago and do law/promise theology with the eggheads, and Farmboy Ed could do likewise with the students not quite so gifted. It was a strange and wonderful relationship. [You can guess which adjective applied to which one of us.]

The Lone Ranger image is a good one. For Bob was also a “masked man,” even to this buddy. There was more going on inside than he ever let me see. How many times did a conversation end with him saying: “I’ll have to tell you about that some time.” But such times never came—even as we spent lots of time together in the last months at his bedside. But one thing I did hear at his bedside that I’d never heard before: “Eddy, the FUN we had—at Valpo, at Seminex, in Crossings. And it was all FREE! But you’d better go home now. I can’t take much more of this.”

Like the Lone Ranger, Bob also used silver bullets, colloquial expressions for the specifics of law/promise theology. The besetting sin of us “good folks,” was the “Pharisee heresy.” Christ’s work on the cross, what Luther called the “froehlicher Wechsel,” became God’s “sweet swap” with sinners. When Law and Gospel contended, the Gospel finally “trumped” the Law.. See the banner over there carried in many a Seminex procession. “We shall rise our Lord to meet, treading death beneath our feet.” In the banner the word “Death” is silver (that’s powerful), but “Our Lord” is gold. Gold trumps silver.]

One of the silver bullets was his “folksy” retelling of the gospel for this past Sunday. Reminiscere is its ancient name, the Sunday in Lent to remember how God remembers us – “in gold.” The text speaks about trying to save your life and still losing it versus losing your life for Christ’s sake, and then gaining it all back again. In the Bertram version: Life is not win/lose. Nor is it win/win, says Jesus. It’s lose/lose. But there are two

different ways to lose. One is hanging onto your life like this – arms crossed clutching close to the chest – and that is “Lose PERIOD!” The other is giving your life away connected to Christ – arms extended outward. You still lose your life, but it’s “Lose COMMA.” And there is another clause coming.

Today we mark God’s COMMA to the life of blessed Bob. The rest of the sentence of Bob’s life story is on the banner.

March 22, 2003