

Anticipating Easter in a Eulogy during Lent

Colleagues,

M. Douglas Meeks is a dear friend. In the days of Seminex he was teaching at Eden Seminary (UCC) here in town. Eden opened its doors to us when the doors shut at Concordia Seminary. We partnered in projects. Once during that time, when Doug was on sabbatical leave, Eden asked me to teach “his” course in systematic theology. So some not-so-crypto-Lutheran accents got into the mix alongside the heritage of John and Charles Wesley that continues in the life and work of Doug Meeks—not only here in the USA but throughout the worldwide Methodist community. But then it was Luther’s own introduction to the Epistle of Romans which “strangely warmed” John Wesley’s heart upon first reading.

But Doug is not only a Wesley scholar. He studied under Juergen Moltmann in Tuebingen and was a major mover in introducing Moltmann to the English-speaking world.

Here are the official specs:

M. Douglas Meeks

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If you wish to know more about him, google his name.

In February Marie and I were guests of Doug and Blair Meeks at

their home in Nashville, Tennessee. We learned about his brother John, at that time in hospice care. He sent us this "In Memoriam" for John just a few days ago. With his permission I pass it on to you.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

In Memoriam
John Edgar Meeks
By M. Douglas Meeks
Andrew Price United Methodist Church
March 26, 2011

The agony of John's battle with leukemia was interrupted three Sundays ago by a joyous day on which he was clear and energetic – a precious memory we shall always treasure. Marilyn, his sons and daughters-in-law, and his siblings gathered around his bed. Because John's voice did not have its usual resonance each of us took turns leaning over to have a conversation with him and to be kissed by him. In my conversation with John he said, "You know in all of this I am teaching you all." The obvious implication was that John was teaching us how to die. I said, "Yes, that's true, but you must know that all these years you have been teaching us how to live."

John was a consummate teacher who loved life. He was a teacher of life. He was, it seemed to me, a teacher for everyone he met and he met each of us with just what we needed to learn in order to fall in love with life. A theologian like me is a poor sort of person who needs constant teaching to save me from my academic abstractions. Every once in a while he would ask me the question, "What do you do all day anyway?" It's a good question

for a theologian and, I guess, for anyone who wants to live life more fully. But no matter what criticism John had to offer, he always gave us an acquittal and never failed to say in one way or another what Christ says to us all: "I forgive you. I love you."

Friday last week there was a visitation before the Service of Death and Resurrection at Collierville UMC. The reception line lasted nearly four hours and reached out to the street. The outpouring of love for John astounded me. How could one person be loved by so many people? John had at least six professions during his life: soldier, teacher of history, football and track coach, school administrator, alderman on the city council, and pastor. As the wide circle of friends, former students and football players, members of his congregations, and colleagues in each of these professions came through the receiving line I heard some themes repeated over and over : "he was the best teacher I ever had," "he saved my life," "he helped me believe in myself and got me into college," "he made our workplace more human," "when I was addicted, he was the only person I could trust," and "I wanted to shoot the bishop when he moved John from our church."

John's spheres of teaching were immense, but the one in which he most excelled was his own family. John and Marilyn had a fierce loyalty to each other and a deep love for each other, and that made them a life- giving teaching team for their sons Marcus, Matthew, and Benjamin and in recent years their beautiful daughters-in-law Rachel, Libby, and Patrice. John had a wonderful way of teaching without presumption or bombast. He said exactly what he thought and felt without embellishing it or qualifying it with academic irony. John, like the prophets, taught us with everyday gestures in everyday life situations. He taught us with the acts of gardening, coaching, fishing, cooking, and dancing. The gestures of his teaching often jarred

us and made us have second thoughts about how we were conducting our lives.

Two days after John and Marilyn found out that he had acute leukemia he entered the hospital to begin treatment. Those days were filled with anxiety and apprehension of what lay ahead. But the last thing John did before leaving for the hospital was tie up his tomato plants. It was not something I would have done. As I have reflected on it, this was an act of hope; it was an act of life in the face of death. Tomato plants have to be taken care of in expectation of their harvest. John taught us that the little acts of hope show forth our large hope in God's future. Tie up your tomato plants, no matter how bleak things are, because God's promises for God's future are true and faithful.

You couldn't stop John from coaching. Football was in his blood. He played at UT and I at Vanderbilt. When we watched the games, I used to tell him it was more virtuous to root for Vanderbilt because that taught you long-suffering. If anyone at a party gave the slightest prompting John would get up and give detailed coaching instructions on a football cross block and when he stretched out his body to demonstrate, he took up the whole room. John taught us that pastoring is like coaching. Coaching is a matter of saying what we should do and showing how. John thought that when you spoke the gospel you had to show how to do it by doing it yourself; don't just do what I say but also what I do.

John was an inveterate fisherman. When the Meeks-Upchurch clan gathered yearly at the Cowpasture River on the Virginia farm that is in Blair's family, John would invariably come with his van expertly packed to the brim with fishing and cooking equipment. John was a serious, scientific fisherman. He thought anything worth doing must be done with excellence. I was quite satisfied with my way of fishing which was to lie on the raft

reading the New York Times and sipping Mountain Dew, waiting to swat a horsefly that came too near; and I took great pride in the fact that I occasionally caught a fish. But John said I was a disgrace to the arts and sciences of fishing.

Through his fishing John was trying to teach us the patience of communing for long hours with the fish and all other creatures of the river, the discipline of taking time and not rushing life, the art of casting and contemplating. And when he started, as the New Testament says, fishing for human beings, he applied the same devotion to excellence and patient waiting, gently casting the gospel and waiting for the Spirit to give people new life. There are no short cuts in good fishing and no short cuts in being a minister. The people in his congregations knew that he gave everything he had all of the time and with all the excellence he could muster.

John was not only a great fisherman; he actually cleaned and cooked the fish and prepared all the fixings of the feast. Over and over again he taught us how important to the soul is life at table over a good meal. His cooking nourished our bodies; his Spirit nourished our souls. John was a great believer in Methodist pot-luck dinners as all the members of his churches knew: Rossville, Moscow, St Matthews, and Andrew Price. At St Matthews John could be found every week with our brother Bob and John's son Ben preparing a meal for the congregation.

John loved the sacraments of the church. When he presided at the Lord's Table he delighted in God's nourishment of the life of God's people. Our son, John William (the namesake of John Edgar), wrote these sentences about his uncle: "I know of no single human being on this planet who has made a meal of his faith more than John Edgar Meeks. Sounds like hyperbole, but it's incredibly easy to say. If you watched him pray he was not demonstrating or peacocking, he was praying. He was not

pontificating or philosophizing, he was praying. He was not begging or acquiescing, he was praying. I know about theology from my father, I know about prayer from my uncle. I don't know that I'll resolve my issues with faith before I die, but that will be on me, not because I was not surrounded by faith. That is a gift and I know it."

When he had to take disability leave last summer John said there were two things he wanted to continue: his teaching of spirituality and his visiting of the prison. He took the Lord's command to visit the prisoners with utter seriousness. Last Christmas in a healthy interlude between chemo treatments John was on death row at Riverbend Prison handing out Christmas presents. Over the years John and Marilyn have spent many weekends in the prisons of west and middle Tennessee bringing the gospel's message of peace and hope and freedom. This semester I am teaching a theology course in Riverbend Prison, and since John's death one of the greatest consolations for me is to hear from prisoners their profound gratitude to John for witnessing so faithfully to God's gift of life in a place that promotes despair.

Finally, John was a dancer. As he did in gardening, coaching, fishing, and cooking John danced for the sheer joy of it. His dancing was a sight to behold. John was a lot bigger than I, but somehow God had created in his body a rhythm for the celebration of life. He had music in his bones. Blair sat by his bed in the hospital and sang hymns with John. Sometimes in these last weeks all he could do was mouth the words and keep time with his fingers. But in earlier days if John heard any music with a decent beat he would be up dancing, no matter where he was, and you just had to be prepared for him to pop up in the aisle of a theater, or anywhere else, and swing with the music. You just couldn't stop him. Except for my sister Joyce no one else in our generation has this rhythm, and not many in the second

generation. But at Sherry and Bob's wedding two summers ago John's grandchildren and nephews and nieces, from age two to fifteen, followed the pastor turned dancer on the dance floor and danced their hearts out.

When John danced we knew he was compelled by the resurrection music, by God's power over death. And when you saw John dancing you knew that the church should be dancing because if the resurrection is real, there is no way to respond to it except by dancing. In medieval art the risen Jesus is depicted as dancing with his robes flowing out to embrace all the dead and bring them into the life of God. We have given John to this Jesus, this dancing Jesus victorious over death, in whom we trust that God's power over death will make all bodies, the lame and the limber bodies, the cancerous and healthy bodies, the underfed and the overfed bodies, the bent low and the too proud bodies, dance in joy. And there in the midst of this dancing you will find John Edgar Meeks delighting in God's joy.

Amen.