

Baptismal Identity

Colleagues,

Gloria Austerberry is a member of Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Today's ThTh posting is her homily delivered there at last week's midweek Lenten service. When she was baptized, the name given her was Gloria Lohrmann. Yes, her brother is Marcus Lohrmann, Lutheran bishop in Ohio, the author of last week's ThTh 670. Good gospel theology must be in the genes. That is, in the regenerated genes post baptism.

Both Gloria and her husband Charles Austerberry were once in St. Louis. He was doing his Ph.D. here in town that gave him his ticket to become professor of Molecular Biology and Protozoology(!) at Creighton University in Omaha. Gloria was working in the Nuclear Freeze movement at that time.

During those St. Louis days Gloria enrolled in the semester-long Crossings courses held at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, and both Chuck and Gloria participated in Crossings workshops. Unforgettable was one such course, Crossings from Luke: Bringing God's Peace to Earth, where Gloria with her peacenik knowledge, commitment and verbal skills sat at the seminar table right next to Larry Lemke, also articulate and theologically savvy, the head honcho for the F-16 (or was it 13, 14 or 15?) fighter program at McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft Corp. You should have been there to hear both of them link their daily work to the "peace laid in the manger."

Of course, you weren't, but what Gloria proclaimed to her congregation last week (remember, she's not the pastor) and now to all of us below is more of the same: Bringing God's Peace to Earth. Which word, "peace," you recall, was Jesus' first word to the fear-smitten disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening.

So read on. Even though it's a Lenten meditation, Gloria is egging us on with Easter.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

**This I Believe...My Worth is in my identity "Child of God," given at my Baptism.
Lenten Address at Augustana Lutheran Church, Omaha,
NE, by Gloria Austerberry
April 13, 2011**

Cross

How beautiful we've made your cross,

A shield against our petty fears;

A yoke of steel around our necks

*Much safer than your blood and tears. How fast we turn from
rough-hewn logs*

Pretending holes from spikes aren't there

Ignoring splinters, stains, and dirt;

For such a cross is hard to bear.

How comforting our silver chains

How shine our steeples in the sky.

But beautiful are two charred logs

On which a Man once chose to die. – Larry Michaels

What is the measure of a person? Sociologists say, money, power, and prestige determine worth in our culture. Well, we are all in this culture and have to live with its ways of deciding about us.

This I believe...that my worth, my value is in my identity "Child

of God," given at my Baptism. I became God's kid, not just Hugo and Thelma's kid, that day. I shed the culture's way of discounting people that day and took on a new garment as my heritage. My faith – our faith – started in a tribe of Hebrew nomads and got passed on from generation to generation through a cloud of witnesses. Our forebears in the faith talked about God and to God and believed God was talking to them in their inherited stories and in their lives. They believed God became flesh in Jesus; they tried to think and act like Jesus. And so do we.

The season of Lent, that is, spring, came to be the season in our Christian tradition when we seriously take stock of our faith. We put everything on the table here in a way we can't do in the other seasons. Perhaps we can do that because the green in the landscape and the blooming flowers are such a great consolation after the bleak winter. We consider: are we really any better than Jesus' friends who ran off afraid when Jesus' fate became apparent? Are we better than Peter, who said three times in one day he didn't even know Jesus? Would we be found in a crowd shouting "Crucify!?" An old song put it like this: "Will I deny him or crucify him? Will I ally with him? Will I stand by him?"

Lent is all about us – how we gather together, how we tell the stories of faith, and how we share our bread and soup and our bread and wine. If you were here last Sunday you were witness to a pretty new way of gathering here at Augustana, the way of welcoming all the diversity of gender preferences that are among us, in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identifications. We had forgotten the stories of how Jesus went among all people, most often the hurting, the cast-aside, the poor, sick, and the lame. Sunday we stood and sang "We are straight and gay together, and we are singing, singing for our lives." We heard and sang new songs. This is what it means to

get new wineskins for new wine – to devise changed ways of worshipping and living that convey more clearly what we are learning and what we want to do in God’s world.

For way too long, we church folks have been too quick to judge others, too slow to welcome others. We followed cultural standards that have nothing to do with our faith identity as God’s kids. We are the “Time for Burning” church, the church that in the 60’s got caught on film for time and eternity acting the same way most of white American churches were acting – privileged, entitled to the best and the most of everything, and having an exclusive club. I think we are all still horrified at the sin of arrogance, so obvious to us now, and its exposure. It makes no difference that I wasn’t at Augustana in the 1960’s. The same dynamic was everywhere – in Houston, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland. I know because I lived in or near those cities growing up.

[ES. Background. From Wikipedia. A Time for Burning is a 1966 American documentary film which explores the attempts of the minister of Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska, to persuade his all-white congregation to reach out to “negro” Lutherans in the city’s north side.

The film chronicles the relationship between the minister, the Rev. L. William Youngdahl, his white Lutheran parishioners and black Lutheran parishioners in the community. Youngdahl was the son of a former governor of Minnesota and federal judge, Luther Youngdahl. The film includes a meeting between Youngdahl and a black barber named Ernie Chambers who tells the minister that his Jesus is “contaminated.” At one point another Omaha Lutheran minister, the Rev. Walter E. Rowoldt, of Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, states that “This one lady said to me, pastor, she said, I want them to have everything I have, I want God to

bless them as much as he blesses me, but, she says, pastor, I just can't be in the same room with them, it just bothers me." Rev. Rowoldt and other ministers also discuss the concern that blacks moving into white neighborhoods will decrease property values.

The attempt to reach out does not succeed and Youngdahl resigns from his job as minister of the church.

In 2005, A Time for Burning was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

The black barber, Ernie Chambers, completed law school and was elected Senator to the Nebraska Legislature in 1970. By 2005 he had become the longest-serving state Senator in the history of Nebraska.]

When I was in college, I viewed that movie called "A Time for Burning." Pastor Ewald Bash, Associate Director of the Youth Division of the American Lutheran Church, asked a group of us students, "If you belonged to this Augustana Church, what would you do now?" I didn't even know where Omaha was on the map. Little did I know that more than thirty-five years later I would still be thinking about that question. I'm still a little mad at the people who most wanted to have their exclusive club, and a little mad at the ones who left because the church wasn't acting quickly enough to open the doors wider. I'm mad at myself too, for my failure to grasp my true identity at any given moment. That is, my identity as one of God's kids from Baptism, valued and loved by God and the family here God has given me.

We look forward to the lilies of Easter, no, we need the lilies

to comfort our aching hearts. Yes, we are God's kids, but we can think of things we'd rather keep hidden. The flaring trumpet flowers and the blaring brass music say to us "No need to hide anymore...Forgiveness and grace are the working words now."

We do have a whole lot of history to try to make sense of when we prepare ourselves to finish the sentence "This I believe..." I want to understand the Bible in the light of modern scholarship. So, like many of you, I challenge old assumptions about the texts. However, our identity remains fast. My worth – your worth – our value together as a community of faith – it's all rooted in God's love for us and the stories we can tell because of that love which has changed everything. I diligently memorized as a Lutheran 8th-grader a long list of questions and answers from Luther's Catechism. Anybody else ever do that before getting confirmed? What matters more to me now are questions about what justice could look like now – and here – in Omaha, Nebraska. Jesus' stories and our stories throw light on what God's Kingdom is all about. I will take the minutes remaining to me to talk about stories.

We always start Lent with the story of Jesus' temptations after his forty-day fast in the wilderness. Such a story! The devil – however we picture this being – tempts Jesus to turn the stones of the desert into loaves of bread. Not catching him there, Satan tells Jesus to throw himself down from the heights of the temple and test the power of the angels to save him from death. In spite of his physical hunger and human insecurities Jesus resists this. Then Satan tells Jesus that all earthly power will belong to him if he bows down to Satan. But Jesus resists the temptation to be the ultimate power-holder on earth! What a story! Well, that third temptation is not us! Or is it?

Do I have to get everything I want before I share with my neighbor who asks for help? Do the poor have to meet my

standards for being deserving before I give them anything? Do I have expectations of others that keep me from seeing those whose customs are different from my own? Am I anything like the religious leaders of Jesus' day who looked at the blind Bartimaeus but never really saw him and did nothing to allow him dignity? More questions than answers, these days.

We have the story of Mary, possessed of a demon, as they said in those days. Jesus, instead of ignoring Mary because of her gender or her sickness, heard her pain, touched her, and healed her and blind Bartimaeus too. He risked the wrath of the religious leaders who couldn't bear any authority higher than theirs. Their wrath did find its mark, you know.

We enjoy singing about how God "makes us shine with gentle justice," as we just did in the evening's anthem. However, justice hardly ever comes gently. You'd never say "gentle tornado!" Justice comes with birth pangs. It comes when we let tension sit there until we know what is right, what we have to do, who we have to talk to. Changing things to be more just will upset people who have to be in charge and maybe have to give up something.

As many of you know, Augustana Lutheran Church is a member organization of our coalition for community organizing, OTOC, Omaha Together One Community. Our involvement through the past 15 years has meant we pay annual dues and respond individually to fund appeals. But more importantly, it means that we are part of a storytelling scene that reports what is real in our lives and pays close attention even to difficult stories. This year Deb, Nathan, Ann, Mark, Chuck and I have represented Augustana in OTOC action teams in the areas of supporting a sense of community for refugees, workforce development (job training), youth enrichment, and neighborhood revitalization. Many more of you have attended public meetings in support of OTOC's agenda. I

just came from a meeting that is part of an ongoing leadership training series for refugee leaders within their various communities that Deb was helping lead. This Friday morning some will be standing with refugee families in their quest for safe, healthy housing, and I'll be there too.(*)

More justice comes with OTOC's involvement in the city budgetary process. We question the authority that says we can't afford adequate publicly funded summer enrichment activities for children and youth. Or we can't afford to help families get good schooling for their children or effective job training for adults.

Being God's kids, we come to the meal of bread and wine prepared for us each week when we gather. When we partake of Communion week after week, we re-enact that God's gifts are for all, for me, for you. Like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany, we listen to God talk and follow God's image around until we get it.

I'd like to share with you the words from the hymn "The Summons" by John Bell. Listen as if God is talking to you.

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or
scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me? Will you let
the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

*Will you love the you you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world*

around,

Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

We may decide to answer this way: "Lord...let me turn and follow you...where your love and footsteps show. Thus, I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me."

Remember these words from the book of Isaiah: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run, and not be weary. They shall walk, and not faint." Is.40:31.

(*) Refugee families have been telling us stories about their living conditions. OTOC mediated between residents and the city housing code inspection office to designate a day when the city could inspect apartments, with the goal of improving conditions. Language barriers and fears of eviction had hampered open communication previously.