

Bob Bertram in memoriam, Part II

Colleagues,

It was on this Thursday –52 weeks ago—that Bob Bertram died. ThTh 248, George Forell’s “Is it Still Worth Being a Lutheran?” had just been posted when I got the news. Was that title on that day a serendip or what? Bob’s own 82 years of “being a Lutheran” might signal his answer if George, Bob’s Luther-scholar buddy from ancient days, had ever asked him. But it isn’t the label “Lutheran” that counts, Bob would have been quick to say. It is what the label points to. And nowadays different Lutherans point to different things. What did Bob’s label point to? Here’s an answer from an eye-and-ear witness. She is Cathy Lessmann, current office manager for Crossings who also doubles in the same role for the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis [LST-STL]. The occasion was another 50th anniversary, this time Bob’s 50 years of teaching. We confected a liturgical wing-ding at an ELCA congregation and as it unfolded, 5 “witnesses” arose one each from the 5 decades of these 50 years to give testimony. My decade was the second one when the two of us were theology profs at Valparaiso University. As at the wedding at Cana, the best wine came at the end. Cathy spoke for the last 10 years, Bob’s teaching in the Crossings Community and for LST-STL. Thelda Bertram had the last word, of course, a reprise for the whole half century.

And now, here’s Cathy!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Robert Bertram our Teacher, a 50th Anniversary Celebration

I'm here to represent lay people. By now I figure that there's got to be hundreds and hundreds, perhaps thousands and thousands (because 50 years IS a long time!) of lay people, like many of you, whose lives have somehow intersected Bob's life. We're not doctoral students, we're not intellectual giants, we don't consider ourselves colleagues, we're just the plain old simple people who have known Bob over all these years, have sat in on some of his classes, some of them Crossings classes, or in our Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis, have worshiped with him, have heard him lecture, have been his neighbors, or have worked with him.

That might sound unimpressive and unremarkable, but don't tell Bob that! My goodness! To hear him talk about us, you'd think we were the most remarkable people in the world! He absolutely raves about us! I can't tell you how many times he's said to me, after a class he's taught in our Lutheran School of Theology, "My, Cathy! Aren't these people SOMETHING! I just can't get over them!"

And you know what it is about us that he raves about so much? Our faith! He tells us it is SO great! After a while we realize, because he is a good teacher, that he's right! We catch on that our faith IS great, not because it is so heartfelt or sincere, but because it is in JESUS, and Jesus makes our faith great...You might say Bob is impressed with the company we keep.

Bob takes great interest in each one of us and in our lives and in our relationships; so much so that we all consider him to be

our very best friend, our very own personal mentor. We vaguely know that Bob has other, important duties, like mentoring doctoral students, engaging in ecumenical dialogues, editing the new Book of Concord, writing his own book, etc. etc. but he just seems so concerned about US that we think we're first on his agenda. We love being with him, I think because he radiates acceptance. He is extremely patient with us, so kind, so forgiving of our shortcomings.

Often he has more confidence in our abilities than we do ourselves! (But then that gives us confidence.) He can bring the hardest concepts into language we can understand, and he can do so without intimidating us with his vast knowledge. He corrects us with such gentleness that it takes us a while to realize we've been corrected! I remember it once took me three whole days to figure out I had been reprimanded by him!

You might say Bob treats us AS IF we were some kind of royalty, AS IF we were beloved siblings to Jesus Christ himself! AS IF I, Cathy, were Jesus' twin sister whom He dotes on, or Carolyn Crowe, or Sallie Holland. Once again, (with the Spirit's help and because Bob is such a good teacher...and by now I hope you realize I don't mean teaching just through lectures!) we catch on: We ARE royalty: beloved children of God because Jesus makes us his siblings! And perhaps that was Bob's intent all along, to teach us who we really are.

But I also think there's another reason that Bob cares about us lay people so much, in spite of the fact that we're not all that attractive. Bob loves us because we're the Church, and Bob loves the head of the Church, Jesus, so very much. So, he has dedicated 50 years of his life ministering to us, teaching us with his life and his lectures.

Bob teaches a course called Christian Theology III on the Holy

Spirit (the next time our Lutheran School of Theology offers this class, you really ought to take it!) or the HOLYING Spirit as Bob prefers to call her. There we learned that one of the means God uses to make people, us, holy is the Church...other people, sometimes individuals, through whom he sends his spirit (as if these people are funnels for that Spirit-Wind to blow through). Well, ALL of us who know Bob can't help but think that he has acted as that kind of funnel for us, that we have been holied by our encounter with him.

In class, Bob makes sure we understand WHICH spirit it is working in us. He asks, how do you know it is THE Holy Spirit? The Answer: because THE Holy Spirit ALWAYS points to Jesus. So back to Bob. How can we be sure that it is THE Holy Spirit funneled through Bob Bertram to us, making us holy? Well, just take one example, the Crossings method which Bob came up with many years ago. I can almost hear Bob asking me himself, "Cathy, what is it about this segment of your life, or this relationship of yours, pinpointed in this Biblical text, that prompted God to intervene so DRASTICALLY as to send Jesus, his beloved Son, to earth to be crucified?" "Remember Cathy, go back and do a proper diagnosis. It is not just the external problem that needs healing, it's also the internal level, and most critically, the eternal level." And THEN to hear the sweetest, most precious words ever heard, put so simply in terms of "the sweet swap" which heals my "eternal," my "God" problem: Jesus offers to take my death, my sorrow, my sin, and in exchange gives me his life, his righteousness, his position with God, and in so doing, heals the whole of me.

Yes, I have been holied, and so have many hundreds, thousands of other people. But here's the funny thing! We completely forget to go to Bob and say thank you to him! Instead, we go right to the Father, and we thank Him for holying us, for sending us such a powerful blast of the Spirit Wind. But

especially, our encounter with Bob prompts us to give thanks for Jesus, whom we get to call our Savior and our Lord.

Cathy Lessmann