

Candice's Presentation – January 2015

When Cathy Lessman asked me if I would be a presenter for this conference, my initial reaction was that I am not qualified! I only graduated from seminary in 2013 and I am only 6 months into my first call as Associate pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in O'Fallon. I'm just a baby in this field. And anytime I feel like a baby, I get a bit insecure because I'm reminded of my position as the baby of my family. Is anyone here baby of their family? Then you know what I mean, right? How many pictures are there of your older siblings? And how many of there are of you? Exactly. There are literally dozens of pics of my sister and brother and maybe one of me in a diaper. So it's hard to be the baby, you feel a little insecure.

There's a joke I like to guilt my parents with- every new parent gets a baby swing. When I was little, they had the hand crank. Well, with the first child you never use the swing because you just wanna stare into their face while you rock them sleep. With the second baby, you still rock them to sleep, but every now and then you use the swing so you can help your first child with the potty or something. By the third child, you've taught your oldest how to rewind the swing to keep the baby quiet, while you beg the middle child to take a nap.

At any rate, Cathy asked me, and actually I'm getting to a point in life where there fewer and fewer opportunities for me to feel like the baby, so I thought why not, I'll share what I got. I'm going to talk to you today about how my journey to the Crossings community, how I have tailored the methodology around my style, and then I'll wrap up by talking about some of the challenges that I've encountered trying to preach Christ crucified.

By now you've heard the Crossings Community is committed to the proper use of the Law/Gospel distinction. As a young girl growing up in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, I can tell you I am familiar with the Law part. I can say that with some affection as my childhood in the LCMS was a blessed one, I was surrounded by a loving community. Taught by a series of grandmotherly Sunday School teachers the stories of our faith ancestors, father Abraham and his many sons, the cautionary tales of Noah and Jonah. Summers spent in Vacation Bible School learning songs about Zacchaeus, the wee little man and Jesus Loves Me. I went through confirmation and memorized the commandments, the creeds, the Lord's Prayer. And I fell in love with the church.

But my brother didn't. You see, my grandparents are the ones who took us to church, my parents never attended. A point our pastor would try at times to impress upon us kids, hoping it would make it's way back to our parents. My brother felt the weight of that pressure and one time, it went too far for him. At confirmation class one Wednesday evening the lesson was the sixth commandment. Our pastor looked right at my brother and said very clearly, "If you have premarital sex, you will go to hell." And my brother immediately thought of our parents. Both just 16 years old when mom fell pregnant with our sister. Of course, they would get married and remain so today. But what my brother heard was that these lovely people, who he adored, a mother who cooked his favorite chicken casserole, a father who taught him how to fish and ride a bike, were going to hell for a mistake they make as teenagers not much older than him. And he was done. Done with the church. Done with faith. Done with the Law proclaimed there.

That's the problem with the Law and no Gospel. I can argue now as an adult whether or not our pastor was even interpreting the Law appropriately. But as a child, I just accepted it. I didn't

feel the repulsion that my brother did, I simply felt the expectation. And being the industrious child I was and still really am, I thought I could rise to that expectation. I was a bit of a church star. I won every verse memorization contest. I strove for every attendance sticker. If God had standards, I would simply meet them. Don't you love the naivety of youth? It lasted a good long while. Into my mid twenties.

Though I don't know that I could articulate it at the time, I had a growing false confidence that striving toward Law fulfillment can give you. It's like that cruel "science experiment" with the frog in a cold pot of water on the stove. If you raise the temperature slowly, the frog won't perceive it's getting too hot and jump out. Eventually, you can get the pot boiling and the poor frog with it. That's the Law, or at least that was what the Law, unrelieved by the Gospel, was doing to me. I became one of those Christians who had an answer to every moral and ethical question and a finger to point at everyone who wasn't measuring up. In my hands, the Law became weaponized morality. All the while, I was just raising the temperature of the pot of water I was sitting in. Deep down I knew I didn't measure up either, I was just papering over my own shortcomings though, using some of those helpful coping skills like denial and projection and rationalization. And my faith world was shrinking. That's what happens when everyone you encounter must measure up to the application of the Law as Gospel. We need only look to the New Testament Pharisees and their tiny circles of truly "holy" people to see how small the world can get.

Anyway, I won't bore you with the sad details of how the weight of my own judgment started to unravel my faith. I'll save that for Oprah. It just did. I was a young wife and mother at 22, living in Montana far away from my family and supporting my husband's new career as a Air Force officer and the weight of my

faith was crippling me with condemnation along with the other parts of my life that weren't going so well. I can remember quietly weeping in the pew on Sunday because I just wasn't good enough anywhere.

Into that mess, walked my dear mother-in-law, Rev. Christina Seibel, who is not unknown to some of you in the Crossings Community. Chris lived in this area in the late 90's when she made the decision to go to seminary. Through her pastor, Rev. Buzz, she found her way to the Lutheran School of the Theology in St. Louis and met her first professor, Bob Bertram- the much beloved and profoundly gifted theologian, pastor, and co-founder of this community. Now to say that my mother-in-law adored Bob Bertram is putting it lightly. She had three pictures in her first parish office, one of her children, one of her grandchildren, and one of her and Bob. She took a few classes with Bob, as many as she could before she transferred to Gettysburg Seminary in Philadelphia, where she graduated with a Master of Divinity.

About that time, she came to visit us in Montana, mostly to see her first grandbaby, my son Garrett. But to see us too. And we talked. And talked. And talked. And I cried and told her my faith wasn't helping me adjust to adult life and all the obstacles and challenges that were coming. That it felt like God would be nothing but disappointed with my terrible failures that were all I could see about myself.

And she shared with me a story about her first class years ago with Bob Bertram, it was only two weeks after she had tragically lost her husband in an accident. And she wasn't sure she should even start class. And Bob did warn her that this class was on resurrection and it would be hard for her to hear some things. But he also promised he would take the time she needed before and after class to

process things with her. So she went. And she loved it, hard as it was to talk about death, it was even more powerful in those difficult weeks to hear the hope of resurrection. But what she wanted to share with me most of all was something she heard from Bertram more than once in that class. And that was this, "The Law drives us to our knees in search of the Gospel."

Now, I know all of you are Lutheran scholars and know your confessions and this line about the Law is probably nothing new. But I had never heard it. All my years of Sunday School, all my years of trying to be who I thought God expected me to be. And I had never heard these simple words. But it described perfectly where I was. I was driven down to the ground, on my knees with a thousand pound anvil on my shoulders. They tell you in pastoral care classes that one of most helpful things you can do for someone is simply to validate what they are feeling. It is absolutely true, and that's what Bertram's words did. They described my condition. It was like seeing myself for the first time. What I saw was a scared little girl terrified of both living imperfectly and the eternal Hell my pastor had condemned my parents to so many years ago. And though it was a sad condition I was in, it clarified in a moment the futility of my efforts to right this ship. It was a blessing.

I wish I could tell you that I heard the Gospel clearly that same day too. I did and I didn't. Somewhere in there my mother-in-law told me about the promise of my baptism and the power of the cross. But it's a funny thing about living in the Law, you tend to want to keep living in it. It is in a strange way comforting, if not habit forming. So I stayed in the Law awhile longer, but at least I understood my condition. And I knew there was strong medicine for it. But hearing the full release of the Gospel would come a little later and also in the form of a single sentence that spoke perfectly to my condition.

That sentence came about 5 years and one more baby later, my daughter Abigail. And it came right here in Belleville. My still young family was transferred to Scott Air Force Base. Somewhere in that last five years I had discerned the call to seminary, or I should say I uncovered it really, as it had been there since the experience of my baptism at the age of 8. I knew I needed to start by finding a home congregation here and I found St. Mark Lutheran Church, just a few miles down the road.

I was so excited that first Sunday we visited St. Mark because I noticed the Pastor's name was Ron Neustadt and I had just gotten done living in Germany for three years and knew, or thought I knew a little bit of German. So when Pastor Neustadt introduced himself to us, I said, "Oh! Your name means, new street!" To which in his most gentle and kind way, he said, "New city actually, but you know a little German, do you?" And I was hooked on his humble, affable manner and the welcoming people there and found a church home.

Ron Neustadt became a mentor and pastor to me as I started seminary. And I heard the Gospel in his preaching. I heard that I was baptized, that I was a beloved child of God. I was beginning to put the pieces together about this Law/Gospel distinction. And it was just in time really. My husband went through a tough deployment and soon after, we would begin going through a tough divorce. It wasn't long before the little girl who knew the Law started blaming herself for her failures and started hearing God's judgment on a broken marriage.

And then came one Sunday, I'm embarrassed to say I can't even remember the text or rest of the sermon. I just heard Pastor Ron say, "Christ absorbs the critique of God." Again, maybe you've heard this before. But I hadn't. Or at least the Law was just proclaimed so much louder that I couldn't hear it until just now. And this is why, folks, Bob Bertram's book "A Time for

Confessing" is so relevant. I have sat in church pews and listened all my life, I was in seminary for goodness sake! And this was the first time the confession of Christ crucified fell on my open ears. It is why we must preach it every single week. And Ron Neustadt did and it was all I heard. He might have had a great story, with a catchy hook, maybe some great laughs in there too. But all I heard was the Gospel. All I heard was that Christ absorbs the critique I was under. And all I felt was the hand of Christ pulling me up off my knees for the first time. It was just in time. The Good News is always just in time. I have found in the years following this "aha" moment that my once shrunken world has gotten so much larger. With the measuring stick finally seized from my hand, I was able to extend it in love and service- gladly even- toward those I'd closed off.

I told Pastor Ron about that sermon, I emailed him that day. His response was just as many of you who know him would guess it would be, "Well, I had good teachers," he said. Just like him to point away from himself. But he's right. And we share one of those good teachers, the Rev. Dr. Ed Schroeder would become another mentor of mine as I took a few classes through LST during my seminary time. He and Ron would both encourage me to participate in my first Crossing's Conference 5 years ago, which was free to me as a seminary student. And so began my relationship with this community and a deep respect for the Crossings methodology which lends itself so beautifully to seriously addressing the weight of the Law and boldly confessing the Gospel of Christ crucified. Just this week I read Steven Kuhl's treatment of Jesus' call to the disciples in Mark, written in 2006. He has a really clever take on the double meaning of the word crisis in the Chinese language. Did you know the Chinese character for the word crisis is a combination of two other characters meaning "danger" and "opportunity?" Well you do now thanks to Crossings and Steven Kuhl!

Well that's my journey to Crossings. Thank you for patiently wading through a short autobiography with me. I've reached about the midpoint of my material. And to wake you up a bit, in a moment I'm going to have you turn to your neighbor to talk for a minute about I topic I give you. I'm just kidding. I'm actually a pretty serious introvert and those are the most dreaded words an introvert hears at a presentation. I appreciate all you fellow introverts and promise there will be no talking to neighbors. Let's just press on. I do want to share with you how I begin my approach to the Crossings method. It's a little quirky, but I thought it might give you another model to toy with as you develop your own patterns.

Often the hardest thing for me to ferret out in the text is the Law. You'd think after a lifetime of living in the Law, it would be easier, but ironically I've found it makes it harder to recognize. Which, by the way, makes our task even more urgent given that so many widely heard preachers make quite a living at preaching the Law and lots of people are living in it and don't even know it.

At any rate, I have to work a little harder to find the Law. And when it comes to difficult tasks, my mind craves symbols. Sometimes I even dream in symbols. Have you ever had that where you go to bed thinking about something and then you end up dreaming about it all night. Especially in seminary this was true, I would go to bed wrestling with some theological concept and in my dream my mind will come up with symbols that helped me understand it.

So making the Law/Gospel distinction comes down to working with three very simple symbols, you'll definitely recognize one.

The first is just a plain line "I". This for me is Adam as he was intended to be. Or me or you as we were intended to be- in

shalom with God, creation, and neighbor. Now the Law, when it is applied in one's life as the means of salvation, as the Pharisee's of the Gospels applied it, it has the effect of taking this "I" and curving it in on itself "@". For me this symbol is a simplified version of someone wrapped in the fetal position. It also points to the Latin phrase Martin Luther uses in his Lectures on Romans, "incurvatus in se." I'll read his words in case you don't have perfect recall of Luther's lectures:

"Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake." [2]

This is the visual of our condition when we lean on the Law for salvation. So curved in on ourselves that we can see nothing, not God or neighbor, because we're staring at our own navel. So when I approach the text, I'm looking for this symbol to jump out and help me identify the Law- or where it's application is drawing people into themselves- where their world is being made to shrink. That is where I begin the diagnosis step of the Crossings method in order to get to the external, internal, and eternal problem.

And now the visual you all know so well, of course. It has all the elements of the first two symbols. Christ on the cross. The Gospel in symbol form is the complete opposite of this curved in self, that is seeking to protect what it's worked so hard for. Christ on the cross, arms spread wide, completely open and curved toward us. So much so that he exposed his entire body to full weight of the Law for our sake. And that is the beginning

of our restoration back to this symbol “I” and our appropriate use of the Law as gift and blessing. So when I approach text to find the Gospel, I’m looking for the cross, of course, although not every text points to it directly, so it takes a bit of mining. That is where I begin the prognosis step of the Crossings method, and get to the eternal, internal, and external solution.

Those are my symbols. Not overly creative, but they help me and as a former youth pastor, I can tell you that kids think in bullet points and emoticons and symbols, so this helped them make sense of Law/Gospel. But it also helps me approach the text simply. One of my go-to texts for demonstrating these symbols is when in John 20 Jesus appears to the disciples. I’ll read it, verses 19-23:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews (remember fear is the opposite of faith according to Luther), Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

So there you have it. The disciples had gone back to their old habits of unfaith and the result was an ever shrinking world where they were literally locked away from God and neighbor (can’t hardly share the Good News when you’re locked in room) totally curved in. Into that sealed world, the crucified Christ, still bearing the marks of the cross, walks in. The uncurving begins, from there they are sent back out into a larger world to

forgive sins, their lives takes on this cruciform shape.

I have given this text the full Crossings methodological treatment, I can email to you if you'd like. But the symbols are usually my starting point and my spin to the method.

Now because I am just a fledging new to flight in ministry and in employing the Crossings method, I am just beginning to notice some of the challenges and difficulties I've encountered in my efforts to spread the Gospel and I don't have all the answers to those difficulties. I'm going to share with you a couple of them, such as they are, in hopes of simply adding to the important dialogue that goes on between people concerned with promoting the Promise. First, I gotta tell you what happened a few weeks ago when I was telling Dr. Ed Schroeder about some of my difficulties. We saw each other at the Rev. Mary Etta Skinner's celebration of 30 years of ordained ministry, congratulations to her, she is s dear friend and has my deep admiration. At her celebration Ed inquired as to my first few months of ministry. And I started to tell him that sometimes the pressure to preach on a specific topic made it difficult to stay true to the Crossings method." To which he quickly and succinctly replied, "Well stay true to the cross, my dear, not the method!"

That is the first difficulty I have encountered. Staying true to the cross. And the biggest threat to that in my ministry so far is the pressure to push mission. Mission was the buzzword as I went into seminary and it was the mandate as I graduated. Mission. Now we know that when the Gospel is received and the promise of forgiveness trusted, that people are moved from beneficiaries of mercy to agents of mercy. That is the response of faith made active in love. And that love is what we're talking about with mission. It is the love of neighbor in word and deed. It is the feeding and healing ministries we do in the

world. It is the peace and compassion we advocate for. That is mission. It is the fruit of our faith.

But more and more mission is presented as the Gospel. Mission is presented as the means by which we are made right with God and one another. Mission, in good old fashion terms, is works righteousness. A problem Crossings has been noticing for many years and Lutherans have been noticing for many many hundreds more. So my difficulty in feeling pressure to preach works righteousness is nothing new, for me and many of my peers it just wears the mask of mission. So many sermons have I heard, many preached from the academy, where the Good News of the text came down to an instruction to serve the homeless a warm meal, or plant a community garden, or recycle more, or go on a mission trip. The promise is always the “feeling” of closeness to God and of forward progress for the human community.

The question is, and perhaps has always been, how do we commend good works without losing sight of the Gospel? How do we preach Christ crucified to people desperate for personal direction? Because that is real in our culture. People are hungry for meaning and are looking to the church to provide outlets for service. I saw this more clearly in my own church this past Thanksgiving. We sponsored a Thanksgiving meal for O’Fallon Community, aimed at serving turkey dinners to those who otherwise would not have one. It was the first of its kind and joint sponsored with several churches. We fed thanksgiving meals to about 75 people. We had over 125 volunteers. More people showed up to serve than to be served. Folks are looking to serve, they are looking for outlets to serve. And so it’s no surprise that preaching falls into the trap of simply naming those outlets to serve. The problem is, of course, noble and worthy as it is, mission is simply the iron fist in the velvet glove. What happens when the one who serves as though it were the means to be made right with God loses the ability to serve?

How can one be made right then?

I don't have the sweet spot answer to commending works. But, I know it's worthy of conversation as it pertains to homiletics among both lay and clergy. Of course part of that conversation, if not the bulk of it, will have to be about the 3rd use of the Law. The details of which are beyond the scope of my humble enterprise tonight. And certainly the hour grows late, so perhaps it can be part of your night-cap conversations. Let me give you just a little more fodder for that chat. It comes from the Rev. Karl Boehmke, some of you may know him. He and I met at Bethel Lutheran Church in St. Louis during my vicarage there in 2012. Our friendship was forged in a heated debate on sanctification one afternoon and though he has moved out west to Pullman, Washington, we still trade emails on the topic from time to time.

I'll share some of his last email to me, sent when he learned I was speaking at this conference.

Dear Candice, I see that good things will be discovered in Unearthing Gospel

Gold, next January, and that you will have your turn to speak. My hope is that a

Silver Lode of Law might also be rediscovered, and perhaps that you with pick and shovel of biblical theology might help in the re-opening.

When LCMS experienced its trial as by fire 30 years ago, the issue of Third Use of the Law came very briefly into the open. Some of us hoped at that moment that the subject might be studied and debated. But other issues overshadowed it.

On page 4 of Crossings, Michaelmas, Vol. 115, the First Use of Law at three

levels is beautifully set forth. Likewise the blessings of the Gospel at three levels. The Third Use of Law at its two levels is conspicuously absent. This is typical of much present-day Lutheran and Reformed theology. My contention is, that this absence is responsible for the guilt which Lutherans carry with them instead of the joy of salvation and a determination toward a life of holiness. Garrison Keilor may laugh at Lutheran guilt but it is by no means an insignificant burden.

God through Jesus Christ sets us free from the sin which the Law has made clear to us (First Use). It was sin, not the Law, which condemned us; the Law itself is good, a blessing from God.

Once we are freed from sin, we are free to do those things which are pleasing to him who calls us into his marvelous light. We can rejoice in good works!!!!!! We can follow in the footsteps of Jesus who perfectly fulfilled the Law of love.

I do believe Law and Gospel work in tandem in one and the same circular dynamic. Both a gift of God's grace.

Please, Candice, continue digging into scripture to see whether these things be so. And much happy association between the Crossings Method and Yourself! Joy, Karl

So, there you have it. Mission and the 3rd Use of the Law. Talk among yourselves later. And please include me and your communities in the conversation!

Lastly tonight, I want to talk about the difficulties of preaching a Gospel of life amidst a shifting ethic of death in our culture. Way to end on a happy note, right? But this one is the biggest struggles for me, especially in my ministry to young

people who are all around them beset by a culture that is either obsessed with death for all the wrong reasons on the one hand or misunderstands the totalizing power of death on the other hand. Let me pull all that apart a little bit.

My grandmother, Ann Wassell, still kicking in the Quad Cities at 90 has long told stories about gathering around her dying family members and saying good-bye to them in their own beds, in the own homes. They would hold vigil around them, praying, singing, and reading scripture. Death, for her and for many others in her generation, was a family matter, dealt with at home. And in that way, there was no escaping it's harsh reality and it's often gruesome details. As we have progressed, I use that term loosely, the business of death has been removed from the family home. Up until I was in my late twenties, the only encounter I had with death was at the funeral home, where my loved one looked anything but dead as they lay in their coffin in full makeup. Death in that sense is becoming less real for young people. And that has had a strange effect in my estimation. It has made death more easily parodied and portrayed in violent, graphic detail on movie screens and video games. And then what follows suit is a desensitization to death in general. It's simply a game we play or a show we watch.

And so a Gospel that takes seriously Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Finds little purchase on ears who trivialize death to the point of absurdity and witness it's grossly cartooned display with a distorted sense of normalcy. Only to have that coupled with a 24 hour news cycle that reports death all day to the point of making it routine. The net effect of which is that death has lost it's power among the youngest people we seek to share the Gospel of life with.

And unfortunately the church colludes with this development as it so often misrepresents and denies the power of death. We do

this most often when we reduce death to just the physical body and grant life eternal to disembodied souls that escape the dying body at the last moment. It's the heaven and hell talk everybody does, but no one really follows through to it's natural conclusion. It's the gentle words meant to comfort, "that our loved is looking down on us from heaven, or that Grandpa's spirit is in a better place." It is the dualistic language that is the common parlance of Hallmark cards and contemporary music and self help book. And is it simply not Biblical. And it simply distorts Christian hope in the face of death.

For this, I must turn to author Douglas John Hall for help. In his book, *The Cross in our Context*, Hall talks about the difficulty our society faces in dealing with death. The existence of an immortal soul that escapes the total eradication of death faced by just the physical body is the solution to a massive denial of death. Put simply, we don't have to die all the way because our spirit escapes to some ethereal heaven in the clouds. In this way, Hall says, sin loses its severity, death loses its sting, and Christ's salvific crucifixion on the cross is cheapened. Spirit and soul language softens the blow of judgment and tarnishes the shine of grace. Put simply again, it makes both the Law and Gospel forgettable. And if that's the case, you might as well preach mission. Because all around us are several generations of people for whom death is remote, yet also commonplace and only half bad since your soul gets away with it.

The answer for us, as Lutherans who take seriously the deadliness of sin, is that we must reach back into the scripture and pull out bodily resurrection. The only hope in the face of real death is bodily resurrection, as the death of the body, the whole body (soul included) is as Paul says to the Corinthians in 15:26, "The last enemy to be destroyed." And the resurrection in

Christ is as Paul says in Romans 8:23, “the redemption of our bodies.” The whole deal. Nothing escapes death and in that way, a theology of the cross, where death is completely conquered by Christ is truly the Good News that sets us free. We have to take our methodologies all the way to Easter in the pulpits and take seriously the task of Christian Education in the Sunday School classroom. And not to get on a soapbox, but we have to address as parents and mentors the culture of death and violence our children and young people are subjected to. It’s real and if you have a young person in your life, as I have, you know how concerning it is.

So those are the two difficulties, though there are others, that I’m working through. Thank you for letting me share them and my journey to Crossings with you. We have some time, I welcome any questions or comments you might have.

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