

“Church of Joy” theology—right here in St. Louis, Part II The ELCA

Colleagues,

Last week’s posting concluded with these words: It’s not just “them” in the LCMS. It’s also us, the ELCA crowd. We’ve got “mega-church-itis” too. Remember that “-itis” = infection. It’s here in ELCA congregations in St. Louis too.

SEGUE

The newest ELCA church building in St. Louis is a mini-version of Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona—projection screens, bandstand, many mikes—the whole nine yards (well maybe four-and-a-half). Though we ELCA-ers regularly pooh-pooh the Missouri Synod for its uptight theology and awful attitudes about other Christians, we’re joining them with no reservations where it counts, where the rubber hits the road. We too want to “grow” our congregations. And for us too, as in Missouri (see last week’s posting), it’s “all very objective, based on statistics.” But the fundamental question remains: Where is THE Gospel in all this?

CASE STUDY

Evidence for this came—again—on May 8 at the St. Louis “Lutheran Professional Church Workers Conference” [LPCWC], our ELCA crowd’s monthly get-together at one of our parishes. This time in one of the suburbs. Our liturgical focus was the upcoming 4th Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. The host congregation is known for its “postmodern worship . . . serving people who think traditional worship is boring.” So on that second Thursday in

May we did it their way. The band, the music, the “worship style” was what Marie and I had witnessed not too many weeks before at the Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, but in a mini-format.

But it’s not the “worship style” that rankles me. I can swing with “contemporary,” so I’m cool on that. Remember that as you read on: no complaint from me about that worship STYLE. My gripe about this “contemporary service” is the absence of Gospel, THE gospel, both in the songs we sang and (sadly) also in the sermon. The Eucharist saved us, for Christ’s promissory word WAS there.

For the remainder of this ThTh posting I propose NOT to discuss the sermon. [Well, perhaps just this much: Like the Epistle of James it was good law, giving us God’s own criticism. Stuff we needed to hear. But for coping with that criticism we got thin gruel. As I remember it was something like this: Jesus says: Don’t be so divisive. That’s a no-no. You’re s’posed to be “one flock.” So be one. What I do remember very clearly was that never once did the Good Shepherd’s own “grounding for oneness” in the John 10 sermon text, get mentioned. If not mentioned, then surely not used. You know it, his “laying down my life” (he says it 5 times) and his “taking it up again” (2 times). Yet it was a powerful sermon. But none of Christ’s new wine was offered.]

What I want to focus on in this posting is the songs we sang and the WINE inside those songs. [Forget, for now, the WINESKINS, the worship style. We may get back to that later.] To be blunt: the WINE of those songs was an “other” Gospel. In the overall liturgy we were still hyping Easter. In our songs there was no Easter-Gospel, but some “other” one. So next day I sent this e-mail to the worship leaders—all of them dear friends and great folks:

Colleagues,

Perhaps you too noticed:

In the hymns we sang at the LPCWC liturgy the words “I, me, my” occurred 55 times. Compare that with the 28 Easter hymns in the Lutheran Book of Worship [LBW]. In 23 of those hymns, by my quick count, you never find any one of those words at all. In the 5 where you do, the total is 19 times. The hymn of the day yesterday surpassed that number all by itself—22 first person singular monosyllables. To cite an old question from Brother Martin: What does this mean? Wouldn’t that be a nitty-gritty topic for us to look at during next year’s LPCWC program?

Two responded and thought I was complaining about “worship style.” One wondered if perhaps I was an organ nut and just hooked on “our wonderful, theologically correct hymns [which] proclaim in an intellectual, theological way, but mostly cold, staying in the head.” I was instructed: “That won’t cut it these days.” Then both of the responders made a case for being “contemporary” also in our hymnody.

I must have been too subtle by just asking what the numbers might mean. So one more time: I’ve got no gripe about contemporary styles. Even more, I think it’s in Christ’s mission mandates. I intended with those numbers to be talking about the wine, not the wineskins. The texts, not the tunes. Both of these dear folks also chided me for my “bean-counting” and reminded me how often the “I-bean” occurs in the 23rd Psalm and in Luther’s explanation of the creed in the Small Catechism. One song we sang was a new version of Psalm 23. That was the one with 22 I-beans. But I wasn’t just bean-counting. “I, me, my” are not dirty words for me.

I was zeroing in on the message coming across in those songs. This does need more work, but here's my hunch. The ego-centric songs we sang signal the culture of America. Not just the wineskins of "with-it" music, but the wine of America's culture of narcissism. Narcissism is the Reformation definition for original sin—"incurvature into oneself." In our songs we were proclaiming narcissism as our faith and claiming to worship God thereby. In unending refrains we told God what "I am going to do." Here are a few we sent heavenward: "I will ever praise you...I will seek you...I will learn to walk in your ways...I will follow you...I want to praise you...I sing for joy...Forever I'll love you... Forever I'll stand... I am putting all my trust in you." That has to be an "other" Gospel, doesn't it?

How far away is that Pharisee in the famous parable with his "I-beans:" "God, I thank thee (yes those are his exact words!) that you have rescued me from all those evil alternatives so that I can praise you with my fasting, my alms, etc." Jesus' grim words after the Pharisee finishes his liturgy is that he didn't "go down to his house justified." Why? Narcissism, even when it's religious narcissism, is an other Gospel.

The total absence of the I-beans in those 23 LBW Easter hymns—and their paucity in the other 5—comes from the different Gospel in those hymns. Seems to me that it's plain to see by just comparing texts. It's not that these "old" Easter praise pieces are afraid to use first-person pronouns. When they show up, the first person pronouns come in different places, as they regularly do when you have different Gospels. That's no surprise.

What may strike some as surprising is that Luther can help. In his Galatians commentary Luther talks about "the grammar of the Gospel," as a really different grammar that follows when the Gospel is up front. Sentences—God-sentences and I-sentences—get

structured differently from what otherwise passes as “normal” grammar in human speech. It’s really not that complicated. The Good News is not what we are doing for or about God, but what “God in Christ” is doing to, for, with us—in past, present, and future tenses. “Christ HAS died. Christ IS risen. Christ WILL come again.”

That’s THE Christian Gospel. That’s what WE need to hear. That’s what we’re called to sing about. That’s what our world needs to hear. Not how strong my faith and conviction is, but who The Strong One is on whom that faith is focused. And why he’s worth trusting. This “why he’s worth trusting” is a sine qua non. And why is that? Because to answer that why-worth-trusting question you’ve simply “gotta” talk about Good Friday and Easter, CHRIST’S Good Friday and Easter. You simply cannot let it go unmentioned, even worse, un-used, and still be doing Christian praise.

Back to bean-counting. Never once in all the songs we sang at that LPCWC liturgy does Christ’s cross and resurrection get mentioned. Never ever. Is that an “other” Gospel, or what? My one respondent short-shrifted the LBW “style” for Easter praise as “our wonderful, theologically correct hymns [which] proclaim in an intellectual, theological way, but mostly cold, staying in the head.” Argh! Yet even if that were true, what’s “theologically CORRECT” about songs with no cross, no risen Christ?

Of course, in the texts of the LBW Easter hymns we folks doing the singing do indeed appear with our pronouns. But it’s “us” in Gospel-grammar: most often in the plural, most often in the objective case. We’re on the receiving end of the sentences. That’s the grammar of first-person pronouns in Easter theology. The subject of sentences for Easter praise is not “I,” but the Risen Christ & the God who raised him. We ARE there in the

lyrics, but on the other side of the verbs. We're the receivers of the goodies. Our worship posture is faith's posture, the posture of receptivity.

And the plural is not insignificant. The body of Christ operates, as Elert says, on "the liturgical we." [Someday I ought to translate those paragraphs and pass them on to you.] So the great Easter hymns are "we" hymns, even if only one of us is singing. But in these Easter hymns "we" tell God blessed little of what all "we" are going to do for him. The Pharisee had it wrong—liturgically. He was telling God about himself, even if it was his pious self. He did not "go down to his house justified." Apparently the God who justifies thought that someone else had been worshipped in the Pharisee's praises. Little wonder. Narcissism is not a fruit of faith—and surely not any faith engendered by Easter.

Clean contrary are the last recorded words of Luther: "We are beggars. That's the truth." Luther is not doing the humble-bit here at the very end of his life. His words portray a posture, finally his worship posture. They are not words of despair. Such words keep us mindful—and then tell the world—where we stand. Namely, HERE we stand—on the receiving end of God's largesse. Like St. Paul when he starts boasting: "Look what God has done with a so-and-so like me!"

The beggar's posture is not to be sneered at. Remember, the tax-collector DID go down to his house justified after his liturgy from that posture. And we are called to do likewise—standing before God with open hands and expectant hearts and, if our mouths are moving, same-saying (= the literal meaning of "con-fessing") back to God—and then to the world—what God has said to us. God's talk always comes with God's own grammar: God the subject of the sentence, us at the end in the objective case. And if/when in our singing we do get

around to talking about ourselves—even when we say “I” or “We”—it’s palpably plural with “the posture of receptivity” patent in the pronouns.

That’s the “worship STYLE” of Gospel-grounded liturgy. It’s the only worship style that “fits”—for all the Sundays after Easter, and to the nines for worship on Ascension Day, the second-last segment of Easter.

Sample: A really “venerable” Ascension hymn from 700 A.D. [For LBW folk, number 157]

A hymn of glory let us sing!
New hymns throughout the world shall ring.
Alleluia!
Christ, by a road before untrod [call it Good Friday],
ascends unto the throne of God. Alleluia!

Is that “mostly cold, staying in the head?” Not in my head. From that opening verse the hype goes even higher.

And while you’re scanning other Ascension hymns, page back to the ancient Easter classic “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands.” [LBW 134.] I’ll try to tease you into re-singing all of the stanzas by reprinting the text of the first:

Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands
For our offenses given;
But now at God’s right hand he stands
And brings us life from heaven.
Therefore let us joyful be
And sing to God right thankfully
Loud songs of hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Even though we get mentioned three times in that one verse,

that's not Narcissus singing. That's New Creations singing. Make it personal: that's us. We're singing in Gospel grammar. Hallelujah indeed!

*Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder*

P.S. *About contemporary wineskins. Wineskins are not unimportant. But the Wine is absolutely important. The wine is where THE Truth is. "In vino veritas," the ancient Latins said. And in THIS wine it's both GRACE and TRUTH. Marshall McLuhan made a big splash a few decades ago with his "The Medium Makes the Message"—or something like that. In the case of the Gospel, however, it's the other way around. Or so Jesus claimed: New wine calls for new skins. Consequently it's the wine (message) that makes the wineskin (medium). That doesn't necessarily rule out any skin in advance, I'd guess, any "worship style." But it does say which of the two is the yardstick for the other. And it also alerts us to be suspicious of any wineskins our culture offers. Do they ever come to us empty? So that all we've got to do is fill them with the "good stuff"? I doubt it. So we must be wary. We need to check if our culture's alien wine (other gospel) is still in those contemporary wineskins—in this case—in the very music of our postmodern worship. For the LPCWC episode above I don't know enough about "contemporary" music to tell if the narcissist gospel in the lyrics has also seeped into the music itself. But those who do know should check it out for the rest of us—and even more—for the sake of THE Gospel.*