

“Come over to M.I.T.–and Concordia–and help us.”

Some thoughts on promissio and missio in academe, and a 21st-century promise-truster’s guide to avoiding a host of false dilemmas that lie between Athens and Jerusalem.

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God’s Promise, Our Mission: Making the Crucial Link 1
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1 Steve Kuhl’s Exegesis of Conference Theme: In a sense, we are asking, “How does God’s promise in Christ inform the nature of the church’s and the Christian’s mission in the world? What is it about the promise of God in Christ, if anything, that makes Christian mission to the world distinctive, if not unique?”

First, a note about my title, so as to explain it to myself as well as to you. Cathy Lessmann asked for a title last April, and according to the email record I traced, she said the planning committee wanted to hear me on the topic of “mission on the college campus.” I wrote back that I would think about it during the lunch hour and get back to her. Later that afternoon, I sent the topic and brief description that appears in the program (above). It has an obvious allusion to a mission moment in the New Testament (Acts 16, and Paul’s vision of the Macedonian man saying, “Come, help.”). I chose to use that famous image of “opposite places” once offered by Tertullian and used over and over at my school, Athens and Jerusalem. Apparently I thought I could talk about both “secular” and church-related schools in

the same talk, although I work in a context that sees itself as both Athens and Jerusalem. Finally, my descriptive gloss suggests I thought I could somehow show that the needs were essentially the same at M.I.T. and in Athens as they are at Concordia and Jerusalem.

Beyond that, I don't know what I thought I was going to say. (What were those false dilemmas I must have pondered while I jogged that noonday? Most likely false dilemmas such as creation vs. evolution, but in truth, I no longer remember.) I do have some thoughts, however, about the state of Christianity in our colleges and universities, and about the *promissio*-inspired mission we might take up for ourselves in today's academe. I've been teaching and working with the 18-22 year-old slice of the demographic pie that comes to church-related colleges for almost two, full student generations. Much has changed, and much has stayed the same. The mission has always been to preach and teach the gospel and to live the promise, but the context has changed somewhat in 37 years.

I begin with a handful of observations and concerns:

- That sobering demographic projection about Lutherans that's around these days, the one that says ELCA will vanish due to simple attrition by 2046 and the LCMS a year or so later, suggests that there's a ripe "mission field" all around us, probably in our own families. If we're not going to continue having six children per Lutheran couple, then we could at least make sure the two we do have remain active with the church.
- I confess that I have failed at this parental mission. I have three children, one on his own, about to become a parent himself, one in college, and one finishing high school. None are active in the church, although the ones still listed as dependents on my tax forms are required,

for example, to sing with my wife and me in the *ad hoc* Christmas Eve choir at the Valpo Chapel. My youngest, I'm told, has announced on his Facebook page that he's an agnostic. (I'm not terribly worried about this last child. As I recall, it took me a little longer to get there, but I, too, had an agnostic period. I, however, was afraid to tell anyone.)

- When I started teaching at Valpo, 1,000 students (out of nearly 4,000) attended regular Sunday Eucharist at 10:30 a.m. Today we average 100 to 115, including the choir, and most are community people, not students. About 150 students come on Sunday evenings to sing Holden Vespers, and, as has been the case for all my years at Valpo, about 200 attend a 10 p.m. "Celebrate" Eucharist on Wednesday evenings.
- In the '70's, daily morning chapel (in the post-required era) had 400 to 500 in attendance. Today we average 40 to 50. In other words, we could be the canary that indicates to the church bodies we're connected to that there is something in the air that isn't good for our future.
- That's not to say there's no piety, faith, or church on campus. Indeed, the Catholic Student Center remains a vital place of worship, though it's also become a local congregation, and the Evangelical groups (e.g., IVCF, FCA, and Campus Crusade) are very active and draw students from all denominations. My sense is that most people on campus, save a few who must be near-zealots about Catholicism or Lutheranism, have become garden-variety Evangelicals when it comes to their working theologies.
- I once saw my work, at least in part, as liberating young Lutherans from the bibliolatry they'd learned back home. No more. They may revere the Bible, but they don't know what's in it. The proof? They no longer get my jokes.
- In short, I work with a generation that doesn't gather for

worship. Moreover, the utter casualness of those who do attend worship astonishes this old geezer. Even those students who lead our weekday morning services do so in ripped jeans and shirts (usually T-shirts) that look slept in. Their opening greeting is, "Hey, guys. Welcome to Morning Prayer." We make the marketplace's "business casual" look like formal attire, especially on Fridays when the students choose their own music. It's some version or another of "O Jesus, you're so fine, you're so fine you blow my mind. . . Hey, Jesus!"

- While their peers sip coffee, tea, and bottled water in the pews, student homilists exhort one another to be nice, work for justice, and try to save the planet. Most of the adult homilists comfort those assembled with assurances that God loves you and judgment isn't so bad as you think or fear. (E.g., in Advent, we were told that John the Baptist didn't really mean to sound so harsh as he seems to in our lessons.)
- Organists and choirs prepare rigorously. They strive for excellence. As for nearly everyone else, nothing need be taken all that seriously. Structure, formality, and excellence are suspect. A generation raised on "reality TV" and cyber-social networking twitters its time and life away by pretending, or maybe even believing, that my imminent plan to take a shower or make some macaroni and cheese, intentions I broadcast to the world, have the same gravity as getting divorced or even dying. The message is mixed: "Everything has meaning great enough to announce to the world, but nothing really matters."
- I spent part of this past week teaching Rousseau's Social Contract to students in our first-year Core course. They found him impenetrable and suspected he might be a communist. But they did perk up when we got to Book IV, the part on Civil Religion, where Rousseau talks about how

religious difference and disagreement bring on the dissolution of a society. This my students could agree on:

It is impossible to live in peace with those one believes to be damned. To love them would be to hate God who punishes them. It is absolutely necessary either to reclaim them or torment them. Whenever theological intolerance is allowed, it is impossible for it not to have some civil effect; and once it does, the sovereign is no longer sovereign, not even over temporal affairs. Thenceforward, priests are the true masters; kings are simply their officers.

Now that there no longer is and never again can be an exclusive national religion, tolerance should be shown to all those that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of a citizen. But whoever dares to say *outside the church there is no salvation* ought to be expelled from the state, unless the state is the church and the prince is the pontiff. Such a dogma is good only in a theocratic government; in all other forms of government it is ruinous. (Book IV, Chap X)

Without engaging all the necessary contextual issues involved in agreeing or disagreeing with Rousseau, I could also assent to this statement on the basis of my own thinking about what it means to be 'saved' and who is or isn't in that category. But for my students and my children, this position is an orthodoxy they've been taught all through their schooling. At the heart of multiculturalism and globalism lies this kind of thinking in its naked, political form. And, it leads young people toward the notion that matters of faith and religious conviction are OK as long as they don't mean much.

- This fall, in a currently required course called "The Christian Tradition," I required students to read and critique one of a number of books by today's 'pop culture

religion and theology' writers. Fully half the class read and wrote about *The Shack*. Most loved this book. Their reason: The book depicts God as easy-going and against hierarchy, and it seems God really means to save everyone—and that saving has little to do with the cross.

I'm probably wrong about a lot of things, and certainly wrong about a few, but this is some of how I see the context of *missio* in today's academe. How does one go about the mission of promise-telling and promise-keeping in this context? I have one point of *promissio* with which I must remind myself, and you, too, perhaps. And I have one point of possible strategy.

PROMISSIO

In response to all of this kind of talk today, there is lots of current buzz about "the emerging church." This is supposedly a new kind of church and perhaps a new sort of mission Christians can be on, especially the young, the casual, and the disaffected. The most popular depictions paint the emerging church as a transformer of society, a group that will follow Jesus' teachings and get folks to work for social justice and help save the environment from careless consumption. They gather in garages, storefronts, and malls, dress in jeans and t-shirts, and open their 'liturgies' with a greeting such as, "Hey, guys. Welcome to New Vision." The spread of this emerging church, like the burgeoning Pentecostalism in Africa, is supposed to give us hope.

The back cover of the latest *Christian Century* advertises a June 2010 Washington Island Forum titled "Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church." Session titles include: "Somebody Save Me: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church." "Youth and the Church of 'Benign Whatever-ism': Going Viral for Jesus." "Recovering a Missional

Imagination: Why Generation OMG Is the Theological Stimulus Package We Need." I sense that the key ingredient of all this is passion. (The advertised forum leader has a book out called "Practicing Passion," but passion about what? I wonder if anyone connected to all this remembers that "passion" is first of all a word for suffering.)

My hope for the church is also, and only, in the emerging church, but the way I see it, that's the only kind of church there has ever been, a church that emerges. . .*daily*. . .from the font and from the tomb. Daily dying and rising—that's the only "life" the church has ever had, even in whatever era we might think of as its 'glory days.'

In the one, holy, catholic, apostolic, and emerging church, each of us singly and all of us together, are Lazarus, that character in John 11. If I ever get to help start a mission church, I promise I'll do all in my power to name the congregation "Lazarus-R Us." That's who we are. Jesus calls us from the tomb, stinking dead, and hands us over to a community that will strip off our grave-clothes, the first costume we don in a baptismal rite, and by means of things like forgiveness (cf. the verbs at the end of John 11, "Unbind him, let him go;" those are forgiveness verbs elsewhere in John), that community will teach and train us in a new way of "walking" (*halakah*, those in Jesus' day would have called it) and send us on our mission. And what is the mission? In John 11, Jesus calls Lazarus from an old life into the life abundant (John 10:10), the life that Jesus himself lives, the life that finds its mission on the road to Jerusalem which he's already on when he stops in Bethany to call out Lazarus.

And, you will recall, Jesus got Lazarus into big trouble. With Lazarus on the loose, Jesus' enemies plotted now against the newly raised guy as well. How odd. Jesus calls Lazarus from a

grave only to get him killed again shortly thereafter. It's as though when Jesus called out Lazarus, he said, "Lazarus, dear friend, come out of there. Anybody can die of AIDS or H1N1 or cancer or a heart attack. Let's go up to Jerusalem and die a real death, a Big-D Death! Let's give our lives away!" The same call comes to us. Ordinary, little-d death will get us one way or another, but we'll have cheated—better, the Spirit will have cheated—that death out of its power with our gospel, and with living the abundant life by dying a Big-D death—his death, Christ's death.

I believe this about the whole church, not just individuals. The various church bodies—and they are bodies, flesh-and-blood frail bodies—to which we belong are dying little-d deaths. How can we give our lives away, offering them in Big-D deaths that bear witness, that proclaim the promise that will call the dead from the tomb?

SUGGESTION

I read a wonderful book in December and went to a conference to discuss it earlier this month. It's Thomas Long's *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). Get it. Read, mark, learn, and think about it. In this book, Long diagnoses plenty of the ills that have befallen the church's funeral practices in an era that's seen death and dying made captive of the culture, including its funeral directors, the trivializing, anti-ritual instincts to which I referred earlier among my students, and the rampant Gnosticism that's everywhere about us. Long's 'fix' is a new attention to the whole of Christian theology that leads us to take death and life, our bodies as well as our souls, our baptisms as well as our everyday discipleship, and most especially the discipleship manifest in singing, seriously.

I can't recommend this book enough. Let's discuss it at a Crossings Conference if we can. Sooner rather than later.

If I were pastoring a parish, I'd try to work parish renewal around this book. We'd read the book together somehow or another. But mostly, we'd begin again to make funerals among the most central and important ministry we engage in, right up there with confirmation, adult education, and stewardship. Because here is where everything it means to be a Christian comes together.

Here is where the promise of baptism matters, and gets fulfilled. Here is where we get to preach the gospel, not merely do a little therapy that might momentarily comfort the grieving. It is after all gospel, not therapy, that truly comforts! And it's drama. It provides plot for our lives. It declares that things do matter. There is a pattern. The Christian life has a trajectory, a promise-given trajectory. We go down to the dust just like the grasshoppers and chickens, despite our fancy intellectual and imaginative equipment, as Ernest Becker reminded us a generation ago. But, we do not go down unaccompanied. The crucified Christ has come with us under the same condemnation. He accompanies us with singing: "My God, my God, why. . .?" "Into your hands I commit my Spirit, O God, thou faithful God." Those were his songs—the songs of his people, the ones he learned from childhood.

His body, the raised ones whom you see around you, accompany you all through your life, and you them. And no one goes alone through the birth canal into the waiting arms beyond the exit from knowing time as we know it now. Rather we go accompanied with singing.

I would fashion in a congregation a cast of funeral players. Singers, acolytes, crucifers, lectors, even preachers, and, of

course, the Martha types that have always brought food...a holy group of players who would stay rehearsed. For that's what we do as Christians, we rehearse all our lives for the moment when our baptism is complete, or when some loved one's is complete. And our cast of funeral players would require plenty of youth. We'd get them excused from school on the days they "worked" a funeral gig with the rest of us.

My community learned this in July after a colleague died suddenly. Many of you read about it in a homily Ed Schroeder sent out as a Thursday Theology piece. I learned the mystery of preparation and the salutary power of singing the faith in the days and hours leading up to my father's dying. I'd practiced all my life for the time when I would accompany him with singing, though I didn't know until then that that's what I'd rehearsed for. I do now.

So, now I've told my children they must have songs ready. And, I must find a way to teach my students the same thing. I must lead them through rehearsal of the story, the promise-laden story, so they're ready for my death, and for their own. But first, I must get with them about dying, which is serious business, not trivial and casual.

MISSION

I changed the subject, even on myself, with those last thoughts. I started out thinking, writing, and talking about how we might evangelize the generation of my students, and my Evangelical colleagues, too, perhaps. But the thing it will take to do that, really, is to have them sent, or even better, to go with them, on their own promise-initiated mission. I suggested that we make them a cast of funerary dramatists. In the larger scheme of things, and with a more biblical image, we must join our students and colleagues on the mission Jesus sent his friend

Peter on when he listened to Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi and then said, "Great foundation, Rocky. Now, go straight to hell. They can't keep you out. Yes, the gates of Hades can't stand up to your assault."

Like many, I once thought hell would try to storm us, but we were safe in our hiding place. Wrong. We are the storm-troopers, the invaders. We constantly assault the gates of hell. Hell doesn't have a chance.

And this is our mission, the one on which our students go with us—the invasion of hell. Into the breach of alienation and isolation we go. Into all the places where God and Christ are not, there the body of Christ steps in, like the Christ himself invaded hell, and voila! Hell is unhelled.

And maybe it all begins by practicing and rehearsing funerals. . . . accompanying with singing those who enter the birth canal toward that new place where our lives are hid with Christ in God.

To learn this, and to rehearse it adequately, we'll need to learn to take things seriously, like death, and judgment, and the pitiful stench of our self-righteousness. But we can look on these things squarely and, though trembling, unafraid. For we live and die clinging to the promise of the crucified one, or better, held in the arms of the crucified one's body, the body with arms, and songs, right here, right now.

I have two images of this mission, our assault on hell, that might help us recognize when we're in the midst of a critical moment of that assault, and what our resources are.

One comes from a book that tells the story of a young, Dutch, Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum, who spent the last two years of her life, 1942 and 1943, first at Westerbork, a Nazi transit

camp in the Netherlands, and finally in Auschwitz. Her memoirs, entitled *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), tell of a young woman's struggle to cope with life and love and sex and parents, and ultimately with the horrors of the story that goes by the name "Holocaust." In the face of radical evil Ety Hillesum clung to her faith, to her spirit, to her heart, to her God. Late one night, near the end of her days in the transit camp, she wrote in a diary she kept (and which remarkably, got saved):

I shall no longer write in this exercise book, I shall simply lie down and try to be a prayer. . . .I know perfectly well I am not much good to anyone as I am now. I would so love to be just a little bit better again. But I ought not to make any demands. I must let things take their course and that's what I am trying to do with all my might. 'Not my will, but Thy will be done.'

There is no hidden poet in me, just a little piece of God that might grow into poetry.

And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard and is able to sing about it.

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, 'We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,' I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much too long day wash over me, and I prayed, 'Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks,' And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp. I lie here so patiently and now so calmly again, that I feel quite a bit

better already. (pp. 190-191)

One could use this set of images, and I have, to flesh out a whole theology of preaching and evangelizing, but I'll say here only that recognizing our place in some camp full of broken, isolated people who have no words of their own any longer, nor any way to name their God-forsakenness, is the first step. And we who cling to genuine *promissio* can be honest and name truly our sin, our brokenness, our God-forsakenness. We can take it seriously, look at it directly, because we know we have the *promissio*. And the promise is precisely this, that right here, right there, in every place of God-forsakenness, *he* meets us. The crucified one. There is no place we can ever end up, but that even there, he is Lord for us. There, in hell, in the tomb four days and stinking, he shouts to us, "Heads up, I'm coming in!" And he swaps stories with us. We get his, he gets ours. We step into the blinding light. The community embraces us, then unbinds us and assists us in learning to walk.

I have a closing image, a more playful one, about the life of assaulting hell, or better perhaps, dispatching the guards who would keep us from letting anyone go. It's Wendell Barry's poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (*Collected Poems*, Northpoint Press, 1998, pp. 151- 152):

**Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you**

to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot understand.
Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered
he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?

Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

The details in this poem may not be your way or mine, precisely,
to practice resurrection. But **speaking** the truth (both kinds of
truth, diagnosis and prognosis, in places of God-forsakenness),
while all our lives **hearing and believing** the voice that calls
us from inside the tomb, and walking the Lazarus walk—that's how
to do "*promissio*-inspired mission," whether in Athens or
Jerusalem.

[Mission_in_Academe_Niedner \(PDF\)](#)