

Crossing the Word of God with the “Work” of Zion Lutheran’s Church Council

Colleagues,

Marie and I have been away from St. Louis for three weeks—and nobody seems to have noticed. But now we’re back home and I want to tell you what we did on our early spring “vacation.” Some of it was work. Trigger for the adventure was an email from Dick Lanoue, now of York PA, council member at Zion Lutheran congregation there. Couple months ago Dick remembered his involvement with Crossings courses and a workshop too back in the days when I and blessed Bob Bertram were doing both. At that time he was a US Air Force veteran pilot of the mega C-141 transports, stationed at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Of course, he couldn’t tell us what he was really doing, but we could surmise. It was Iran-Contra time, CIA cloak-and-dagger days.

For his own self-crossing essay in one of the courses Dick chose the dicey topic “Can I be a Christian and do what I’m doing in the Air Force at the same time?” One resource he worked through in that study was Luther’s own provocative essay: “Can Soldiers be Saved?” Dick may well be an armchair theologian, but definitely not the sedentary sort—neither then nor now.

Bit by the Crossings bug back then, he never got over it. Now retired in York PA he rattles my chain early in this New Year and asks if I myself might come out of mothballs and lead a CROSSINGS retreat with the Council at Zion Lutheran, his home parish. “We’re a fast-growing congregation. Much of our council’s time is devoted to nuts-and-bolts management and

finance. We need some theology. How about a variation of the 'old' Crossings weekend workshops 'Word of God and My Daily Work'? But this time 'Word of God and our Work on the Council'?"

I couldn't say no. So first weekend of March Marie and I drove out there. The task: Friday evening and most of Saturday with the church council, a dozen or so folks and the two pastors. Then four times preaching—one Saturday evening and three times Sunday morning. A bit of a stretch for one gerontologically challenged, but grace prevailed.

The artifacts from the weekend you can see below.

Church Council Retreat Zion Lutheran Church, York PA

FRIDAY EVENING 7 to 9 p.m.

FIRST HOUR

Devotions, Introductions

Prelude:

Dick Lanoue has sold you on having me here. Here's the reason, I think, why he did this. Dick & I (and others) got involved in CROSSINGS years ago when he lived in Metro St. Louis. Where I still live now—36 yrs already.

We did Crossings, a three-step sequence for linking the Christian Scriptures to our own daily life—our life in church & our life out in the world.

The action proceeded in three steps. We did what at that time was called "Case studies." First a Biblical case—one of the readings that was to show up in Sunday worship. Studying that

text was what we called GROUNDING.

Second we did a case study from today, a slice-of-life from the 20th century. We called that TRACKING. Often we took that slice-of-life right from one of the folks in the class, one brave enough to let us interview her on what's going on in her own personal case-study. Most often we focused on people's daily work. "Sally, what do you do all day that makes you tired by the time the day is over? What do you get from your daily work? What's the best thing, what's the worst thing, about your daily work? When it's all said and done, where does it get you?"

Step three was tying the two case-studies together, having them intersect each other—the Biblical case-study and Sally's case-study. That was the payoff of the process. We called that CROSSING.

For our retreat this weekend I propose using the same three-step matrix. But start with the TRACKING. (So I get to know you folks ASAP.) "Tracking my own slice-of-life as Church Council member at Zion Lutheran Church, York PA."

Then go to GROUNDING. A look at all three Biblical readings in the lectionary for this coming Sunday, the Second Sunday in Lent. The ancient name for this Sunday is "Reminiscere" (Remember Sunday).

The three texts for Reminiscere this year are these:

- A. Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 God's unique covenant with Abraham. Key term: PROMISE.
- B. Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 Imitating the apostle – Paul claims dual citizenship, travels with two PASSPORTS.
- C. Luke 13:31-35 Jesus weeping over Jerusalem: "I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." The imPOSSIBLE PROPHET,

the POULTRY metaphor. [I'm hooked on all those "P" words.]

Finally we'll tie the case studies together, CROSSING your individual case studies as Council members with the Biblical case studies.

OK, here we go. First off write out your own personal answers to the questions on this printout.

"TRACKING my own slice-of-life on the Church Council of Zion Lutheran Church, York PA."

1. What's my calling in Zion Luth. congregation? ["Job" description (your own version). Use verbs—"To do this, and to do that."]
2. When I focus on the fact that it is God (not just Zion members) who is calling me to this work, what—what all—is God asking me to do in addition to what's mentioned in #1 above? Use verbs.
3. What's the best thing (maybe even "fun" thing) for me about this calling?
4. What's the not-so-enjoyable aspect(s) of this calling?
5. If there are any items listed in #4, how do I cope with them?
6. What's the payoff in this calling—for others, for me?
7. If there had been no Jesus crucified-and-risen, would I carry out this calling any differently? [Or positively, Because Jesus crucified and risen is real, here's how that impacts my sense of calling at Zion.]
8. If there is one place where I think I could use some help in this calling at Zion Lutheran, it would be:

[I asked council member to be as self-revealing as they considered proper. No one but me would see their papers, for I intended to take them home that evening and read through them and return them to their authors next morning. That is what

happened.]

FRIDAY EVENING SECOND HOUR

We walked/talked our way through the three lectionary texts for Reminiscere Sunday 2007.

GROUNDING

A. Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 God's unique covenant with Abraham.
Key term: PROMISE.

PROBLEM: Living without God's Promise

1. Heading toward a dead-end future
2. Fear, Despair
3. Disconnect from God
SOLUTION: Living under God's Promise
4. God's re-connect offer: a promissory covenant
5. Abram believed God. Promises only work when trusted.
Trust replaces Fear
6. Living by faith in God's promise: open future

B. Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 Imitating the apostle – Paul claims dual citizenship, travels with two PASSPORTS.

PROBLEM: Earthly citizenship, earthly passport

1. Lifestyle/mindset on this-world stuff. Consumption is God. Shame is glory
2. Enemy of Christ's cross
3. End of the line: humiliation and destruction
SOLUTION: Heavenly citizenship, heavenly passport
4. Cross of Christ sweet-swaps sinners' destruction for transformation. Offers new citizenship. "Heavenly" living while still on earth.
5. Standing firm as Cross-trusters, appropriating the new passport
6. Imitating Paul's mindset. "Conforming" to Christ's own citizenship. Living according to the specs of

the new passport.

C. Luke 13:31-35 Jesus weeping over Jerusalem: "I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." The imPOSSIBLE PROPHET, the POULTRY metaphor.

PROBLEM: Jerusalem chicks—winging it on your own

1. Jerusalem lives contra Jesus.
2. Not just actions, but in the will & heart. The foxy tease to trust Herod or the Pharisee-heresy.
3. Bereft of any cover under Jesus' wings, your house is deserted—by God.SOLUTION: Jesus chicks—under Jesus' wings
4. Jesus the mother-hen prophet, does not merely SPEAK the Word of God, he IS the Word of God in action. Because of this, his death is qualitatively different from earlier prophets who also died in Jerusalem. His Good Friday (and Easter) gathers Jerusalem-chicks, God-deserted chicks, bringing them home to the Father. No previous martyr-prophet ever achieved that.
5. Getting under his wings. Trusting Jesus as "mother" hen. Confessing him as THE ONE who "comes in the name of the Lord."
6. Living out in the world, while still under his wings. Knowing the facts about the foxes. On the lookout for other lost chicks

SATURDAY MORNING. THREE ONE-HOUR SESSIONS

FIRST HOUR

"I read your personal trackings after I got home last evening. There is marvelous stuff there. I wonder if your fellow council

members have a clue of what you do. Without forcing any of you to divulge confidential matters, pick one item from your tracking page and tell your fellow council members about it.”

That took the whole first hour. In the evaluations at the end, many claimed this hour as the best hour of the weekend.

SECOND HOUR

Crossing any (or all) of the three Biblical texts with what’s on the tracking pages. We did find crossing-connections for the key terms in the three texts—God’s promissory covenant, Jerusalem chicks vs. Jesus chicks, and travelling with a new passport in council work. But it didn’t have the pizzazz that the show-and-tell had had in the previous hour. So I proposed that in the final session Saturday afternoon, I would create an agenda from what I’d learned about them for a Church Council meeting. Council chairwoman Jen Lau would run the meeting, and I’d sit by and “observe” if anything we’d done in the prior sessions “crossed” over to how they handled the agenda.

THIRD HOUR

Two items.

1. The issue of shared authority in congregational life surfaced. So we took some time to look at Jesus’s own authority seminar with his disciples in Matthew 20:20 ff. With hastily-crafted visuals we contrasted the “point-up” pyramids of authority in normal human institutions together with Jesus’ caveat “it shall not be so among you,” and the upside-down pyramid of the Son of Man’s authority and of his followers. Granted, that authority model entails “giving your life for others.” But the other way is a sure loser on its own. So you pick the best way to “lose your life.” With him and his gospel, he promises,

you do indeed lose, but there's an Easter after your Good Friday.

2. We spent the last half of the hour reading through the 3-page "Care and Redemption of God's Creation" essay archived on the Crossings webpage under "Works of EHS." My goal was to help them look beyond their church council callings to all their other callings, which I'd now heard about after our hours together, and see how they fit under the rubrics of that offertory prayer: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you, God, have made."

We then broke for lunch.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Chairwoman Jen ran the council meeting. Now sitting on the sidelines, I had fun seeing where crossings did indeed occur. They were not play-acting as they went about the "business" of Zion congregation. Yes, budgetary matters, personnel matters, seem always to be "point-up pyramid" realities, but they are not "just" that. To address them only in that way falls under Christ's own caveat: "it shall not be so among you." We have to work at laying the upside-down pyramid over the point-up pyramid stuff in congregational life. That's seldom easy to do. But that's clearly Christ's specs for Zion Lutheran. We've got a promise to trust while doing it, a new passport for our authorization, and a Mother Hen clucking encouragement for us to keep on keeping on.

After council meeting adjournment we had a final swing around the big table for response to: what did you expect from the retreat? What did you get? Comments were such that they let me stick around to do the quadruple-header homily that evening and the next morning.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder