

Eulogy Plus Gospel – A Case Study: David Truemper, R.I.P.

Colleagues,

Marie and I just got off the plane at noon today, returning from Dave Truemper's funeral yesterday at Valparaiso University in Indiana. We brought along Fred Niedner's sermon to pass on to you for today's ThTh posting. Fred does a stellar Gospel-crossing of David's life: the Gospel trumping Truemper's cancer, even though it seemed that the cancer trumped him at the very height of his career and calling. Dave was chairman of the V.U. Theology department (since 1993). Back in the previous millennium (1967) I had recruited Dave for the department when I carried his title. Dave had his doctorate in systematic theology from Seminex (1974) where Arthur Carl Piepkorn was his Doctorvater.

Marie and I engineered it so that the Seminex Resurrection banner stood at the head of the casket in the V.U. chapel. That banner also stood as witness at Bob Bertram's funeral last year. That constitutes a curious "first and last." Bob was the first ever chair of the V. U. theology department. Truemper now the most recent. Between them there were five of us—all still living—who had the job. The banner's feisty Gospel in word and image is: "We shall rise our Lord to meet, treading death beneath our feet!" Here follows Fred's procaliming that to us yesterday.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Now a Word from the Newest Neaniskos

Sermon at the funeral of David G. Truemper

Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso University, 3 November 2004

Frederick A. Niedner Isaiah 25:6-9

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Mark 15:46-16:8

Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Only a little more than a year ago, as we returned together to

Valparaiso after attending Walter Rast's funeral in Michigan, David Truemper initiated a conversation that I now understand was an early stage in the preparations for this day. "I am perplexed," he said, "by the amount of talk at funerals nowadays concerning the deceased. I have always assumed that at my funeral there would be very little talk about me and what I did or didn't do. It isn't really about me."

I knew he must be right, for David knew more about the liturgies of the church than anybody in these parts. I also knew, because we had been raised in the same ecclesial culture and taught by the same teachers, that David's comments reflected what our tradition dictates. In the little, black book on both our shelves, used by generations of pastors for the conduct of occasional services, emergency baptisms, and communing the sick and homebound, the first rubric for the conduct of a funeral in the church says, "It is not in the best Christian tradition to eulogize the departed." This will not surprise many of you, for you know that it is not part of the tradition and ethos of the church body that formed David, myself, and many others here to speak well of anyone, whether living or dead.

So, on that day in the car a year ago, I said, "Yes, David, your funeral is not about you. It's about the gospel, and about the living ones who have only that word of promise to cling to. And yet, it is about you, because if you wouldn't have died, we would not be gathered like this. Moreover, we come not only to join in burying you and comforting ourselves. We come for Eucharist. We come to give thanks. We come to lift up our hands as a way of handing back to God a dear one whom God gave us as a companion on our way through this wilderness. And as we do that we name the gifts for which we're grateful, and we praise the God who gave them." In the end, then, this gathering is about David, and it isn't.

We have much to give thanks for today. President Harre and Randy Lee have already named, in both general and specific ways, gifts that Valparaiso University and the Lutheran family of Christians have received because God called David to follow a vocation in the church and in the academy.

As David's colleagues and friends in this place, we give thanks not only for a gifted theologian, teacher, and intellectual partner in countless debates and colloquia, we're grateful for the host of details he attended to over the years, and now we wonder who in the world will ever figure out the computer programs by which he kept track of our business so efficiently. We'll eventually manage, for David was also the one who brought many of us into the digital age, beginning with that old computer named "Sweet Pea" he built for us and taught us to use back in long-gone Lembke Hall.

His role as director of the Institute for Liturgical Studies was only the visible tip of a proverbial iceberg when it comes to all the ways David taught us to worship through his leadership, participation, and embodiment of the sacramental life we practice and cherish here. Gail Eifrig, our longtime colleague now retired and moved away, may have found the best way to express this gratitude when she wrote in a note this week, "One solace I find amidst this great loss of David's untimely death comes in anticipating the work of the committee that must surely now serve to welcome the rest of us in the heavenly rite of Receiving the Faithful Departed: Herb Lindemann, Jon Nelson, and now David Truemper. My, what a liturgy that will be!"

As with any more or less public person, there are a million stories we could tell today (and have been telling all week, and will tell in the days to come). Our lives get so intertwined with each other that it's all finally one story,

yours, mine, David's. I, for one, would not be here if David had not gone off to finish his dissertation and teach at the St. Louis seminary in 1973. Instead of taking a parish call as planned, I agreed to come here and fill in for a year. David, meanwhile, got caught in the biggest battle of the Missouri Synod's long war and became the only person he ever knew of to get fired from a visiting professorship. Along with the rest of the faculty and most of the seminary's students, David first helped to bury his mentor and Doctorvater, Arthur Karl Piepkorn, another passionate and churchly scholar of the Lutheran Confessions who left this life too early by our way of thinking, and then with the other survivors experienced the birthing of something new, an offspring that soon got the name Seminex, symbolized here today by this Resurrection Banner that comes from those days, and which has been present at so many services just like this one over the past 30 years.

We can't even hint at all the stories in the course of a sermon. But there are golfing stories out there if you want to hear them, and stories that have to do with a surprising knowledge of classical music, a love of the theater, photography, and food. Well, not just food – cuisine.

David's family has a host of stories, too, that the rest of us could scarcely guess at—stories of a man who could fix or invent most anything that needed fixing or inventing (ask his mom about the plumbing in her bath down in Florida), a dad who loved to invent word puzzles for Pam and Rebekah (ask them how they ever found their Easter baskets), and one whose heart melted into sheer delight in the presence of his three grandchildren.

One feature permeates most all the stories. David was a big man who stood up straight, was quick with words, and had a gravity about him—a combination many found intimidating. Moreover,

David knew he could be intimidating. Doubtless many here today experienced that at some time or other. Sometimes, however, even that became a reason to give thanks. During the Truemper family's Reutlingen years, when Pam and Rebekah were schoolgirls, the family nearly got trampled once in a Swiss train station when a throng of skiers on holiday began pressing all at once to board the train. David braced himself against a wall, and made of himself another wall between the children and the crowd, and shouted over his shoulder, "Pasz auf fÿr die Kinder!" followed by a common interjection that's really a theological term in English that starts with a "D." With that, the crowd parted like the Red Sea of old.

On another occasion a group of us colleagues attending a professional meeting in New York City went out to eat and got off at the wrong subway station, whereupon we found ourselves lost on a cold, November night in a very rough district of the Bowery. Five of us in trench-coats, hands in our pockets, with David in the lead, began to walk along the sidewalks strewn with broken glass. Though no one said it, we were frightened, until we began to notice how the few people we saw along the street would dart into the shadows and disappear when they saw us coming. If we had to be lost, it was good to be lost with David.

All his life, however, big, strong, intimidating David knew the truth of the gospel he preached and taught here for 37 years, including the part about our strength being made perfect in weakness. Two years ago came the time to begin practicing that truth with a new intensity, taking it more than ever as a habit in which to live. For a small, malignant invader, no bigger than a battery in one of Dave's cameras, came to make him weak.

He preached some marvelous, gospel-laden sermons in these last two years, and he did perhaps the most powerful teaching in all

his tenure here, openly facing his illness and its threats, and clinging publicly to the cruciform promise that, as he put it, "God loves you, for Christ's sake, and will never let you go." David was a teacher of the theology of the cross, an unabashed practitioner of what some scornfully call 'gospel reductionism.' With Luther, he believed and taught that the only God we can truly know, or dare to give our hearts to, is the one we see in the crucified Christ. There, in that brokenness, we find the God who gives anything and everything to be reconciled to us, who takes on every sin, every shame, every pain, every curse that befalls us or that we visit on one another. And in exchange, we take from that cross the crucified one's identity—we are children, the sons and daughters of God. Nothing more, nothing less.

David wrote his doctoral dissertation on Christ's descent to hell, which had become a controverted matter among 16th-century reformers, and that piece of Christ's biography, which also became his own biography, remained a centerpiece of David's theology. Think how often you heard David quote Luther on what it means to confess that Jesus Christ descended to hell. "It means this," said Luther, "that there is no place I might ever go, no depth to which I might sink, but that even there, he is Lord for me."

That was David's faith and his teaching. But like all the rest of us, he had to learn it over and over and over. Only in his final days did he tell some of us how hard he had worked through these last two years to remain in control as the manager of his cancer, the administrator of his treatment and recovery, the intimidator against all that threatened his life and the years he still hoped to have with Joanna. In the end, it took all the courage he had, but mostly the gift of faith, to receive a simple gift, permission to give up that complex project of saving his life and to rest in the embrace of the

crucified. "I'm free now," he said last Thursday morning. "It's such a relief. Now I'm just one more sinner hanging by a thread."

In that spirit David chose in those last days some elements of this service today. He said he didn't want to be the choreographer, but please read from the beginning of First Corinthians, he asked. And for a gospel lesson, use Mark. All of it.

David loved Mark's gospel, for he came to see in it the simplest and most eloquent theology of the cross in all the New Testament. Mark's Jesus lives and dies as we all do—vulnerable, misunderstood, trusting in a secret that gets tested over and over, agonizing in his last hours, and dying with the hardest question of all on his lips, "My, God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And there is no vindication in Mark. We do not see a happy, healed, risen Jesus who came out on the other side even stronger than before. No, we find only an empty tomb, a messenger, and a promise. "You will see him, even as he told you."

I told David, "Yes, we'll use Mark on the day that we bury you. And we'll find you in Mark's story, and hopefully find ourselves as well." Actually, in our conversations at the hospital last week we found David, and everyone else in the room, all through Mark's gospel. It truly is his story. But in those last days we found Dave's part especially near the end of the story. Many of you know that what finally killed David was that his breath was taken away. Despite all the tumors elsewhere, and the assaults of chemotherapy on his system, it was the tiny micro-tumors that covered the inner surface of his lungs that left him breathing deeply as he wanted, but unable to get oxygen. It's not that different from being crucified, for it's not the nails, the whippings, or even the thirst that

finally kills you. In the end, you can't breathe. (Surely he has borne our griefs!)

Mark meant for all of us to see ourselves in Christ the crucified. But I want to close on this day by pointing to another place where we find David, and ourselves, in Mark's gospel. Only Mark adds one little snippet to the story of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane. There was a young man out there that night, says Mark, a neaniskos (in Greek), that is, a 'new guy,' dressed only in a strip of linen, the kind used for burials. They seized him by that strange garment, meaning to take him, too, it seems, but he fled away naked, leaving the grave-clothes behind.

The prophet Amos had envisioned such a day, when even the strong, the mighty, and the young would flee away naked in the great and terrible 'day of the Lord.' Yes, that was the David we saw in these last days, a strong, mighty, and too-young man whose strength and youth had failed him and who left us on Saturday naked as the day he was born, leaving only a hospital gown behind.

But it wasn't the first time he'd done that. It had happened 65 years before, on the day of David's baptism. The same scenario played out. Like that neaniskos, that new guy, and like all of us, he was stripped of his old clothes, buried with Christ by baptism into his death, and dressed in a new, white garment in which he, and we, might testify that we cling to the promise of a different life, a new life, a life that for now is hid with Christ in God.

Today we see again that neaniskos, and David as well, in the next place he appears in Mark's gospel, sitting inside the tomb, dressed in baptismal attire, and witnessing to the promise. "Don't be afraid. If you would see the crucified one,

don't look here. He is risen. You will see him, even as he told you."

Here the rest of us belong, today and always, the collection of the baptized gathered at the entrance to the tomb listening to the promise of our Lord as it comes to us from yet another neaniskos. And today it's David. So one more time, in Neaniskos David's own words, hear the promise, from a sermon he preached here in this place last April, on Maundy Thursday:

"We live in him, that we may die well. We die with him, that we may live well. That is the path of repentance and faith: we let go all that entices our devotion, all that pretends to make a life, in the death that we baptized ones share with Jesus Christ; we receive from him, crucified and risen, all that genuinely makes a life out of our being buried with him. So dying and living get all turned around, all upside-down, all inside-out and backwards, and our lives, as the apostle says, are "hid with Christ in God," even as our dying is as good as done, together with that Jesus, stashed as he was, in Joseph's fresh-hewn grave.

"What a way to live – buried with Christ. What a way to die – a life hid with Christ in God. What a way to be a part of Jesus, to have a share in Jesus. Imagine, then, as God keeps promise with you, how you shall be able to die – and since you can thus die, how you are able to live!"

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