“Fail, for Christ’s sake!” A Dose of Luther for Lent, 2015

Colleagues,

I don’t mean to confuse you. When you get to today’s offering, you’ll see immediately that it was keyed to last year’s celebration of the Reformation. Why then the “Lent” of the title above? Answer #1: because it is Lent. Answer #2: because the essay you’ll be reading revolves around Philippians 2:5ff, the classic Epistle for Palm Sunday. Today’s writer, Mike Hoy, will give us a distilled version of Martin Luther’s exposition of the passage in a sermon he preached on that day in 1519. Mike’s aim, of course, is to get us thinking about the timeliness and urgency of Luther’s insights for our circumstances today, and that he’ll do. I suspect this will be the first time that any of us have been urged so directly to aim for failing grades. No, let me correct that: it will be the first time we’ve noticed in quite this way that our Lord has been urging failure on us all along. See, for example, the Gospel text for this coming Second Sunday in Lent (Mark 8:31-38; Year B, Revised Common Lectionary).

By the way, if you’ve been following Crossings posts for any length of time, Mike will need no introduction. Our website is graced with a heap of his solid work, and if you’ve purchased either of Bob Bertam’s posthumously published books, you’ll have noticed that Mike was the editor. It’s good to hear from him again in Thursday Theology.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Righteousness as Losing—getting all "Fs" for the sake of the Gospel
Some reflections for Reformation 2014

2017 will mark the 500th year of the Reformation, traced back to Luther's Ninety Five Theses. Several commemorations are already going on, especially in Europe, where they are in their seventh year leading up to this celebration.

How, in 2014, should the church be *ecclesia semper reformanda* [i.e. the church undergoing constant reformation—*ed*.]? A few months ago I was trying to track down the source of some profound insights that speak to the church as one in missional engagement, finally finding them (Aha!) in Luther's sermon on "The Two Kinds of Righteousness" (1519—believed to have been his Palm Sunday sermon). I have provided you with the "cliff notes" of that sermon in the pages that follow, shortening his 10 pages down to 3 (see below, *Ecclesia semper reformanda 2014: Revisiting Luther's "Two Kinds of Righteousness"*). I hope these may prove useful in further reflection. What I have for today are five themes that may provide us some insight for Reformation 2014.

The overall theme is seeing how righteousness comes by losing, not by winning. It applies to Christ himself, based on theme of Philippians 2 (NRSV; regarded by many as an early Christian hymn, and the epistle reading in the Church's lectionary for both Palm Sunday and again recently on Lectionary 26, Sept. 25-Oct. 1, Year A!):

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God

as something to be exploited [Luther: grasped],
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave [Luther: servant; and here Luther's text ends, but we continue],
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.
[Then the upswing; but that is not as significant to Luther's exposition here, because the emphasis is on how we lose with Christ crucified]
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The emphasis we may take from Luther and the Reformation for this year is how we can see (for Christ and ourselves) how righteousness is losing—getting all F's for the sake of the gospel.

1. **Fröhliche Wechsel: How Christ became re-Formed for us**The first F is for "Fröhliche Wechsel," which translated from the original German means "happy exchange" (or "blessed exchange;" Bob Bertram used to call it the "Sweet Swap"). We start with this because it is the basis of the most significant kind of righteousness that makes us whole—the alien (to us) righteousness that comes from Christ to us, a righteousness we cannot attain or achieve on our own. It

is how Christ takes from us what we have coming to us—our sin, our weakness, our death, our most grievous faults—and gives to us instead what he has coming to the One who is (per Paul to the Philippians) in the "form of God." That was not the "form" he chose for us. That "form" he gave up in order to take on another "form"—the form of a servant, a slave, an obedient child, even to the point of death on a cross. Why? Because that is where we are, by virtue also of an evil that comes to us from without, but also within, from birth as children of the first Adam—our original sin. This was an important theme in the Reformation of the early 1500s. The teaching of the church at that time (and today?) was that we needed to clean up our acts with regard to all our "actual sins," and neglected the core root of our "original sin" from which all actual sins proceed as fruit. One will notice that when Luther speaks of the two kinds of righteousness, he considers both of them Christian—the second righteousness being our fruits of the alien righteousness in good works for the sake of others (which is, of course, juxtaposed to the problem of our actual sins). But the exchange of Christ for us is to overcome the darkness of our sin; and from that exchange, any and all good works proceed.

It is important to note here that the Reformers did not neglect the teaching about good works. That was never their intent, though we have often neglected them in our un-Reformation-like teaching sometimes about justification, as if good works were inherently evil. Not so. Not for Luther, nor for the other confessors of that era. But without the "happy exchange," anything we might venture as works of our own are meaningless and fruitless. So that is why we need to grasp this first F—that Christ grasped has grasped us, and did it freely and willingly.

At the heart of Luther's gospel in this sermon is this message:

"The 'form of God' is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness—and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject. He was pre-eminent in such attributes as are particularly proper to the form of God. Yet he was not haughty in that form; he did not please himself (Rom. 15:3); nor did he disdain and despise those who were enslaved and subjected to various evils. He was not like the Pharisee who said, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men' (Luke 18:11), for that man was delighted that others were wretched; at any rate he was unwilling that they should be like him. This is the type of robbery by which a man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God's, nor does he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God, sufficient in themselves, pleasing themselves, glorying in themselves, under obligation to no one, and so on. Not thus, however, did Christ think; not of this stamp was his wisdom. He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied himself, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils. And although he was free, as the Apostle also says of himself also (1 Cor. 9:19), he made himself servant of all (Mark 9:35), living as if all the evils which were ours were actually his own." (LW 31:301)

2. **Failings, admitted penitently**The second F is for Failings, admitted penitently. The first thesis of the Reformation

squares this up as the most central understanding of what it means to be a Christian—that we repent. “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of *repentance*.” (LW 31:25)
Thus in this righteousness we have from Christ, it is part are parcel of our being via baptism that we live that righteousness “whenever [we] are truly *repentant*.” (LW 31:297) Confessing our sins is not the only confessing we do, but it is the first one that understands that any righteousness we have is not going to come from us, our works, our indulgences, or anything else we contrive.

Today, we have a lot of failings to admit, not the least of which is that we are dying. (In another piece I am working on, I will note the overarching truth of our culture—that is a culture of despair, which is the same as saying a culture that is unwilling and perhaps unable to accept the truth of its death.) The fact that we are dying is not the deepest truth, however. Even in faithfulness, you will die. But you can also die unfaithfully; and that is the greater evil.

Whom we have failed is a whole multitude. Luther speaks of all who are “unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we,” “the poor, the orphans, and the widows” as “the neighbor.” (LW 31:304, 306) We have failed that neighbor in grasping our own sense of righteousness over against this very same neighbor, even in boasting of ourselves as righteous while denying this neighbor. Might the list of neighbor-denying get murkier? When we castigate gays and lesbians (as, it seems, will still be the mantra for Catholicism in the immediate future, but also among many mainliners and conservative religious movements)? When we do not understand why it is that the “nones” make no claim

to religious preference? When we say we are open to all but cannot seem to break down the walls and barriers of our own ethnic pride? When we in the church dismiss one another and develop a reputation of exiling and shooting our wounded, even among our own professionals? Might all of these, and many more examples, point to how we have missed our "neighbor" whom we have explicitly denied because we have not seen *failing* for them as a good thing? Notice how also this failing extends to those public individuals who are those placed into responsible offices "to punish and judge evil men [and why?], *to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who does this. They are his servants in this very matter*." (LW 31:305) I have met many such public individuals who did not understand their office as connected with the least of these, and even have a few of my own sins to confess in this regard as a public individual in the church. But also, among the private individuals, even these "seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a great number." Yet they cannot see how they are denying the very basis of a hope that unites them with their neighbor. Justice is only understood as "*my* justice"—never mind the neighbor!

Which leads us to the next F.

3. **Form of servants; our being re-Formed for others**Maybe at the heart of the Re-formation is understanding and grasping by faith our need to be re-Formed for others, even as Christ was re-Formed for us. As Luther explicates this, we, like Christ, have the same mind when we take on this form of a servant and give up the form of God to which we so often want to grasp. In keeping with the Philippians text, "The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in

accordance with the example of Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the 'form of God,' so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it (II Cor. 6:10—'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'), as one of those who lack it. Paul's meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God's gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor's weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own." (LW 31:302)

Taking on the other "form"—that of the servant—is to place oneself beneath the other for the sake of the other. I admit it would be difficult for any of us to have that spirit of Re-form-ation, apart from the life our Lord lived for us and lives for us still. Luther also seemed to think so. Notice his commentary on the story of Simon and the woman who weeps, anoints, and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. Which of these has succeeded, and which had failed? "In like manner he [Christ] will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may

only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor's shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor's. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but that of another…. It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor's condition were better than its own, and if its neighbor's condition is better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better." (LW 31:303-304) As Luther would go on to say, "that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed." (LW 31:305) I have no doubt that it will.

But the truly vibrant, living form is that of being the servant of others. It means taking what gifts we have and understanding that these "forms of God" that we so dearly cling to are not meant to be held on to, but given away, freely, as Christ gave freely for us. □□I have been for a long time now a proponent of missional church. It was a strong accent of my most recent parish ministry. It engaged me and our congregational community with the greater city community in which we were rooted. Are we willing to be a church without walls, taking on the form of those who are around us, embracing them, even celebrating their gifts and seeing these "neighbors" as our partners in ministry. This re-forming is a form of dying, to be sure. But it is a dying with Christ.

4. **Forgiveness**The fourth F is forgiveness.
"In the second class are those who do not desire

vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5:40), to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their own cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of god, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture therefore they are called 'fatherless,' 'widows,' 'desolate'; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their 'Father' and 'Judge' (Ps. 68:5—'Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.'). Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also…. Therefore those in this second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved (Matt. 5:44—'But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'). This is the gospel and the example of Christ (Luke 23:34—'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.')." (LW 31:305-306)

"In the third class are those who in persuasion are like the second type just mentioned, but they are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because

they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. These are called ‘zealots’ and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice.” (LW 31:306)

Both of these classes, as Luther lifts them up here, remind me of themes I have noted in Desmond Tutu, who said, “without forgiveness, there is no future.” Tutu, also (and like Martin Luther King) understood the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice. Few make that distinction, though I find also those glimpses of it even in Luther who noted the proper role of public individuals. The forgiveness that was practiced in South Africa liberated the oppressors by forgiving them, granting them amnesty.

Are we that forgiving?

5. **Ferguson: a test case**As we think of another F—and by the way, I think also a time of crisis, and maybe even a time for confessing—there is the one that is closest to home for us: Ferguson, Missouri.
   My own experience of Ferguson was seeing what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil” where a public official follows orders without recognizing that maybe there is something inherently evil about those orders. I see a police officer who followed protocol and training, and a young man left shot to death in the streets. I weep over this. Some, and many among authorities, have tried to justify the incident; but there is no justification for

this.

Instead, I would have us look back on the prior “F’s” and see if they give us some clue as to how we might rethink all of what Ferguson represents as the glaring “F” of our time. So in the questions that follow, please keep in mind that this is all preliminary, but I hope helpful:

What does it mean for us to truly understand that our Lord placed himself in the midst of those very lives which have been most ravaged by sin—which includes the deadly sin of racism and its effects—even dying with criminals and outcasts, making the harsh truth of their (our) lives his, and his life theirs (ours)?

How do we admit our failings in overcoming white privilege, pride, power, and experiences that cannot even begin to truly comprehend what is really going on in the hearts and minds and lives of others who do not have that privilege, pride, power, and experience?

How might taking the form of a servant be placing the least of these above our own lives, even embracing them as partners with us in ministry for the good of the whole world?

How can we treasure again that we are people who are nothing ourselves without forgiveness; and in welcoming that forgiveness, might we become then a people of that forgiveness for others?

Ecclesia semper reformanda 2014: Revisiting Luther’s “Two Kinds of Righteousness”[i]

The fuller text that is the basis of Luther’s reflection: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." (Phil. 2:5-7]

"There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds.

"The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without…. This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly *repentant*."[ii] "Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours…."[iii]This first righteousness is juxtaposed to our original sin, "likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone."[iv]

The second kind of righteousness: "our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is the manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self…. In the second place, this righteousness consists in love to one's neighbor, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God…. This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence…."[v] This second type of righteousness is "set opposite to our own actual sin."[vi]

Luther then goes into a lengthy exposition of the text of Philippians 2, concluding with this point: "The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in accordance with the example of

Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the 'form of God,' so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it (II Cor. 6:10[vii]), as one of those who lack it. Paul's meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God's gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor's weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own."[viii] Luther then examines further a corollary text in Luke 7:36-50 (Simon the Pharisee, whom Luther calls Simon the leper, and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, whom Luther calls Mary Magdalene). "Simon the leper is now nothing but a sinner. He who seemed to himself so righteous sits divested of the glory of the form of God, humiliated in the form of a servant, willy-nilly. On the other hand, Christ honors Mary with the form of God and elevates her above Simon…. How great were the merits which neither she nor Simon saw. Her faults are remembered no more. Christ ignored the form of servitude in her whom he has exalted with the form of sovereignty. Mary is nothing but righteous, elevated into the glory of the form of God…"[ix]

"In like manner he [Christ] will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them

more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor's shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor's. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but that of another…. It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor's condition were better than its own, and if its neighbor's condition is better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better."[x]

Luther then turns to the question of proper chastisement of evil (contra lawlessness) by classifying people into two groups: public and private individuals.

Public individuals are those placed into responsible offices "to punish and judge evil men, *to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who does this. They are his servants in this very matter*…."[xi]

Private individuals are classified in three kinds.

"First, there are those who seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a great number. Paul tolerates such people, but he does not approve of them[xii]…. Nevertheless such will not enter

the kingdom of heaven unless they have changed for the better by forsaking things that are merely lawful and pursuing those that are helpful. For that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed."[xiii]

"In the second class are those who do not desire vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel (Matt. 5:40), to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their own cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of God, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture, therefore, they are called "fatherless," "widows," "desolate"; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their "Father" and "Judge" [Ps. 68:5[xiv]). Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also…. Therefore those in the second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved (Matt. 5:44[xv]). This is the gospel and the example of Christ (Luke 23:34[xvi])."[xvii]

"In the third class are those who in persuasion are like

> the second type just mentioned, but they are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. These are called ‘zealots’ and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice.”[xviii]
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> M. Hoy October 2014

[i] LW 31:293-306. Thought to be based on a Palm Sunday sermon preached by Luther in 1519.

[ii] LW 31:297. Italics mine. Cf. Luther’s first of the *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517): “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of *repentance*.” LW 31:25. Italics mine.

[iii] LW 31:298. The basis of Luther’s “happy exchange” (*die froehliche Wechsel*).

[iv] LW 31:299.

[v] LW 31:299-300.

[vi] LW 31:300.

[vii] “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

[viii] LW 31:302.

[ix] LW 31:303.

[x] LW 31:303-304.

[xi] LW 31:305. Italics mine.

[xii] Specifically here, Luther notes two passages from 2 Corinthians 6: “All things are lawful for me, but not all this are helpful;” (v. 12) and “To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you” (v. 7).

[xiii] LW 31:305.

[xiv] “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”

[xv] “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

[xvi] “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

[xvii] LW 31:305-306.

[xviii] LW 31:306. Luther provides two Scriptural illustrations: that of Christ and the whip of cords in the temple (John 2:14-17); and Paul’s admonition, “Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness” (1 Cor. 4:21).