First signals from Singapore

Colleagues,

We've been in Singapore almost three weeks now. I've preached both of the last two Sundays. That's likely to continue, since I'm being "farmed out" to each of the seven congregations that make up the Lutheran Church in Singapore for a two-week stint as "theologian-in-residence." They've even printed a business card for me with that information on one side, and our standard USA specs on the other side. My two weeks now closing at Yishun Christian Church (Lutheran) included an evening seminar on one of the topics I've offered before, "In a Sea of Faiths, Why Jesus?" More on that below. Each congregation is also asking for similar seminars or workshops on topics that they have requested.

Besides these assignments of a fortnight each in the different congregations, I have some "church-wide" duties. Biggest one is an every-Monday-morning seminar with the 20-some pastors in the LCS. They've asked for five sessions on "Lutheran Hermeneutics" and five on the Lutheran Confessions. I started the Hermeneutics gig a week ago with the Augsburg Aha! and this week we practiced that on specific texts, including next Sunday's gospel, using – you guessed it – the Crossings matrix for reading and preaching the word of God as law and promise.

The natives are friendly and give me the impression that they want to be more Lutheran. From what I've learned, that links to the fact that very few of the pastors have attended Lutheran seminaries. Not that attending a Lutheran seminary will guarantee much of anything these days. But I digress. The two seminaries here in Singapore, Trinity Theological College and Singapore Bible College, are the alma maters of most of the clergy. Both are ecumenical seminaries, and you can guess from

the very names what the respective traditions are. The only specific Lutheran input for the Lutherans at these seminaries in the past has been a course on “Lutheran Distinctives” taught by an expat missionary professor usually from the ELCA or its predecessor bodies. Right now an LCS pastor with a graduate degree from the Lutheran Seminary in Adelaide, Australia, is currently leading this, and of course he’s asked me to fill out the rest of the semester of his every-Thursday afternoon sessions.

I mentioned before that there are 20 pastors in the seven congregations. Why 20, you ask? Every congregation is really a Siamese twin, with English speakers and Chinese speakers, each group with its own pastor or pastors, and its own worship and community life.

It’s hot and humid, really like St. Louis in July and August. One pastor tells us it’s really been cool the last few days, with a low of 76. It will soon be “normal,” he says, which means a high of 95. We’re still at the end of the monsoon season, with rain almost every day.

Our home is what people call a four-room apartment (the kitchen and two bathrooms don’t count). So: living-dining room, the “master” bedroom with bath attached, another room where we have our computer and desks, and another room that we can use for storage, with a single bed – for visitors! The LCS has provided this apartment for us as part of their agreement with the ELCA mission folks in Chicago who have brokered our presence here as “Global Mission Volunteers.”

Marie has spent lots of time working with the computer, which a young Chinese genius named Adele got configured so that we can still access our usual Compuserve e-mail account. The majority culture here is Chinese, although curiously the first official

language of this nation-state is English. But nobody speaks it the way we do – with no accent! Singapore is small, roughly twice the size of the city of St. Louis, and like St. Louis it's almond-shaped. It has 250 square miles and four million inhabitants, we're told. The public transportation system is super-modern. E.g., for the Mass Rail Transit system you buy a piece of plastic, add value to it as needed, tuck it in your wallet, and when you go through the turnstyle you just touch your wallet to a magic space and the gates open. When you leave at your destination and touch another magic space the super-computer calculates the fare you've used and tells you how much you have left on your pass. Why can't we do that in America?

Enough cultural reflections. Now back to that Why Jesus? seminar of last week. In previous classes on this theme we've had discussions on Why Jesus for Muslims, for Buddhists, for Hindus. And I do have some thoughts that make sense to me and often to students. And much of that is gathered from folks who came from those religious traditions into the Christian faith. I listened to hear how they answered the question why Jesus was both Good and New for them when they heard the gospel. A frequent accompanying factor that I've also learned is the power of the person who's doing the Christian witnessing. We heard it last Sunday from the driver who came to pick us up for church: "It was the overwhelming love and concern for me and my wife on the part of Myron and Edith Danford that finally persuaded us."

The new turf about which I was asked last week is the Taoist tradition that permeates the Chinese world. And there I need to talk to more people and have them tell me what's Good and New about Jesus for folks hooked on "harmony" as the way of salvation. Diagnostically, of course, disharmony is the malady but, as I learned from my class that evening, there is no God-factor in the mix. Instead, the cosmic reality is bi-polar. Opposites abound throughout the universe and within each human

being. Disharmony comes when they are not kept in balance. Harmony is the opposite. Many practices exist to help make that happen, all the way from Tai Chi to proper nutrition. Even Falun Gong, which we've seen in action on the street, offers its own brand of harmony.

I've got a lot to learn, both about this "other gospel" and what's good and new about a crucified and risen Messiah for Taoists. I remember years ago when a Buddhist master from Japan came to Concordia Seminary and he dialogued with Bob Bertram about harmony. I wish I had taped that session. One thing I remember is Bob articulating the Gospel's alternative to harmony. It was not achieving balance with the realities of the old creation. Instead it was the good news of a new creation. But for that you simply had to talk about the Creator, and also his beloved Son, the cornerstone of that new creation. That also brings to mind an axiom I learned from Kosuke Koyama, that the eastern mind stops in its reality quest at the stuff of heaven and earth, while Biblical theology pushes one step farther, to the Lord who made heaven and earth. That Lord needs to be reckoned with, not just the stuff that came from his creative hand.

As you see, I have some work to do.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder