

FOUR WEEKS IN WESTERN CANADA

Colleagues,

Sabbatheology text studies come in the matrix of the Crossings paradigm—3 diagnostic steps, 3 prognostic steps. So you readers know something in advance of what you're getting each week. Not so with ThTh. There's never been a paradigm, let alone a mission-statement, to norm these Thursday postings. Consequently EHS whimsy—yes, and sometimes dyspepsia—has had its day for almost a decade of ThTh postings and the Crossings board lets me get away with it.

So here comes one that may sound like opening school day in second grade.

“What I did on my vacation this summer.”

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That means four Sundays in Western Canada, the last four of the month just passed. For the first two—in Vancouver, British Columbia and Jasper, Alberta—I was asked to be the homilist in Lutheran congregations of the ELCIC (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada)—the “liberal” Lutherans, friendly to my own US denomination ELCA. In both congregations former seminary students of mine are the resident pastors—Richard Hergesheimer and Doug Heine. They said they welcomed turning the tables on their old prof when it came to giving assignments and hearing recitations.

Third Sunday Marie and I sat in the pew with an LC-C (Lutheran Church-Canada) congregation—allegedly more conservative in Canadian contexts and friendly with the Missouri Synod in the USA. Here too the pastor, Marvin Ziprick, is a former student. His congregation is on its way to being a mega-church in a

booming suburb of Edmonton. Big new building, theater-style sanctuary, all worship texts projected on mega-screens, pastor in shirt-sleeves, the altar not used for worship-focus, and sadly not much gospel in the allegedly "gospel" songs we sang. It seemed that the pastor's homily sought to counteract that. Even so, I wondered if he noticed the dissonance.

Fourth Sunday was in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. We went Anglican. Reason was that our host Michael Averyt, Seminex grad, Werner Elert buff (he read Elert's dogmatics—in German!—before he got to the seminary) and all that, is now Archdeacon at St. Alban's cathedral there. The dean of the cathedral, celebrant and homilist for the day, reads ThTh. Our knee-bones got flexed according to Book of Common Prayer rubrics at the early mass.

On one of the Sundays when it was my turn to preach (Pentecost VII), the Gospel for the day was the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37). There are 3 studies on the Crossings website for that text, where Jesus responds to the question "Who is my neighbor?" Two of those three studies take the "standard" pattern of attending to the neighbor question itself, focusing the diagnosis/prognosis there. Ignoring the neighbor is the malady being diagnosed. The priest and the Levite who "pass by on the other side" when they see the victim (=neighbor) "half-dead" in the ditch are the bad guys who get diagnosed. [And who of us is immune to the same analysis?] Solution is to move us "priests and Levites" to encounter THE Good Samaritan, Christ crucified and risen, be healed by his ministrations and then "go and do likewise" as compassionate Samaritans on the Jerusalem-to-Jericho highways of our lives.

Not bad. But is that what Luke wants us to hear? The third text study archived on the Crossings website by Ron Starenko doesn't think so.

Right off the bat Ron tells us that the lawyer who posed the question is the guy in the ditch “who ‘fell into the hands of robbers’ (v. 30), left half-dead.” He is the victim and the law, God’s own law, is the robber who has put him there. The lawyer needs THE Good Samaritan, not to answer his law-book questions, but to rescue him from being half-dead, before total rigor mortis sets in.

Well, that caught my attention, so I snooped around Luke’s Gospel more closely.

First question: Is Luke really THAT “Lutheran?” The law as killer? Self-justification the mortal sin? God’s mercy-Messiah the only solution? Even salvation by faith alone—by trusting (receiving) the merits and benefits of that mercy Messiah? Maybe so.

1. Law vs. compassion in the pericope sounds like law vs. Gospel.
2. Works-righteousness is the central “sin” in classic parables that are found only in Luke: The Pharisee and Tax-Collector, the Elder Brother in the Prodigal Son parable, and then this one where the neighbor-question comes from one seeking to “justify himself.” Thus such folks conclude that they don’t “need repentance”—or forgiveness—since they have no sins to be forgiven.
3. Those very words, “repentance and the forgiveness of sins,” are specified in Luke’s “great commission” statement at the end of his Gospel as Christ’s assignment “to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations.”

Whether or not it’s Lutheran, it is Lukan. So now back to the text of Luke 10:25-37.

Consider this. In Luke’s Gospel, every time he uses the Greek term “nomikos” (from the root-term “nomos” = law) it is in a

conflict situation with Jesus. English translations regularly render nomikos as "lawyer" as in this Luke 10 text. The adversarial situation often comes in a "Woe to you lawyers!" from Jesus, which suggests a different, yes, better, translation for this Greek term. For the NT Gospels never present Jesus as fundamentally in conflict with a person's skill or professional competence—even tax-collectors! So just because a person has a law degree, even a degree in God's law, that by itself wouldn't render him culpable. The conflict comes with how that skill and competence is used.

Seems to me therefore that we ought to translate "nomikos" not as "lawyer," but as "legalist." It's a theological term, not a job-description. Take a look at the places where "nomikos" shows up in Luke and read "legalist" instead of "lawyer." For it is the legalists who "reject God's purpose for them" (Luke 7:30), who "test" Jesus and "want to justify themselves" (10:25.29), who "load people with burdens hard to bear" and trigger Jesus' "Woe!" (11:45, 46, 52), and who are finally rendered speechless when Jesus "heals on the Sabbath," thus breaking the law and yet doing God's saving work (14:3).

So it is not the law degree of the nomikos that puts him in opposition to Jesus, it's his theology. I confess that I've preached this parable "wrong" in the past. So this time when asked to be guest preacher, I sought to do it "right."

Wrong is to treat the parable as though Jesus really intends to answer the nomikos's question, "who is my neighbor?". If for no other reason than this: When did Jesus ever give a "straight" answer to any of his challengers? And in this text Luke gives us big clues. Nomikos wants to know what he must "do" to "inherit" eternal life. And if we missed that one in the opening verses of the text, Luke makes it perfectly clear when the "who is my neighbor" question comes. The nomikos is not asking for

information, he's "seeking to justify himself."

So THAT'S the problem Jesus addresses in this nomikos, not his request for a dictionary definition of "neighbor." He's a legal-IST. But he doesn't know that until Jesus does his diagnostic probe on the man. The parable is not at all Jesus answering his apparently innocent question. We see that in the "twist" at the parable's end, the pun with the word neighbor. Nomikos needs SOMEONE to neighbor him, someone to have compassion on him before he slides into total rigor mortis in his own legalist ditch.

So Step One:

The legalist bug still bugs us too. Doing in order to inherit. Justifying selves. Even in "loving neighbors" by adding an "incurvature back into self" which morphs neighbor-love into self-love. Even worse, doing so—as does the nomikos in the text—when we are actually face-to-face with THE Good Samaritan himself.

Step Two

Which renders us commandment-breakers of the very first commandment, for the business of justifying human beings is God's exclusive domain, the Regime of God. No usurpation allowed. The two "great" commandments are Siamese twins. Break one and you've broken the other.

Step Three

Already half-dead, with full rigor mortis to come. Even if he thinks all his vital signs are OK, the nomikos has been robbed of life by that very legalist regime. Two agents of God's law come by—priest and Levite—but they cannot help him. They are actually more of the "bad doctors" who have left him at death's door.

Using God's law for self-salvation turns God's law into our accuser. Teasing us into trusting it as our way to save

ourselves, the law robs us of the life we sought to gain by it. Half-dead already, total death up ahead. Needed is a Good Samaritan, an agent of God's compassion, healing.

Step Four

The Good Samaritan as our neighbor. Enter the outsider, a despised outsider, the Samaritan. And you know who he is in real life. He's the one talking to the legalist. Often in the NT Gospels Jesus gets tarred with this dirty word "Samaritan!" The negative signals of that term reach their finale on Good Friday. The "Good" of Good Friday and the "Good" of the Good Samaritan are one and the same.

Jesus points to that at the end of the parable with his "twist" on the word neighbor. He doesn't ask the nomikos "so who is the neighbor to be loved in this story?" Instead he makes neighbor the subject of the verb "love," not the object: "Who played the role of neighbor to that victim?" The old legalist answers: "The good guy, he was neighbor." Jesus' rejoinder: "Ok, that's the answer to your initial question: Who is my neighbor? The neighbor that you REALLY NEED is the compassionate Good Samaritan—the very person talking with you. So that's the neighbor for you to love." However, before we love him as neighbor, he exercises neighbor-love to us. Big time. Then and now.

Comes again—this Pentecost VII Sunday—God's Good Samaritan, God's mothering compassion, God's Christ of the cross and Easter in proclamation and in sacrament. Once again the offer of Christ's mercy-exchange. His life for our death. Transporting us to the house of healing—and then after getting us victims to the hostel, Christ pledges to keep on supplying whatever resources are needed to get us legalists completely "healed" as our Samaritan-rescuer keeps coming down that road again and again.

Step Five

“Go and do likewise – phase one.” Let Christ “be neighbor” to you, be YOUR Good Samaritan. Call it faith. Trust his offer in place of the law-trusting, self-justifying routines that are so tempting. Even more intimate and personal: “Trust me,” Christ says, “Hang your heart on me. For in trusting me you are loving me as neighbor. And in doing so you are at the same time trusting/loving the Father.” Faith fulfills both of the big commandments—love God, love the neighbor—in one fell swoop.

Step Six

“Go and do likewise – phase two.” Offer the Good Samaritan to all the legalists in your neighborhood, beginning right at home with the legalists you know the best—and who know best your own legalism. Who of your neighbors hasn’t been “ditched” by the law—either in their law-keeping or their law-breaking? They are the candidates for your “Go and do likewise—phase two.”

Pentecost VII’s second Scripture reading (Colossians 1:1-14) bubbles with specifics:

“filled with the knowledge of God’s will” = What do we know about what God wants? God wants all legalists rescued by his Good Samaritan Son and has designated us agents to spread the word.

“lead lives worthy of the Lord” = lives marked with the “worth” of Christ’s compassion passed on to every ditched victim we encounter. And their name is legion.

“be prepared to endure everything with patience” = it won’t be a piece of cake, but the constant-care supplier has pledged to keep on keeping on with us.

“giving thanks to the Father who has enabled us to share in the

inheritance of the saints in the light.” Did you get that? Not at all do we “do” to “inherit,” but the one Jesus called Father has taken care of that agenda for us.

And then the cornerstone of it all: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness (=self-justification by our doings) and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (=the regime of the Good Samaritan’s compassion), in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

For the nomikos in all of us, that is Good and that is New. Good News indeed!

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder