

Gospel Proclamation—Always a Challenge. At Virginia Tech . . . and at Other Places, All Other Places

Colleagues,

PART ONE:

GOSPEL PROCLAMATION—ALWAYS A CHALLENGE. AT VIRGINIA TECH . . .

In recent days more than one of you on the listserve has told me to show-and-tell what I would have said if I'd been asked to give a "Christian message" at the convocation following the Virginia Tech massacre last month. Not all of these missives were friendly. One, e.g., after reading my opinion on the "Christian message" that was offered at VT, said: "Boy, am I glad that YOU weren't asked to give that message."

So I've been thinking about that. What would I have said, if I'd been asked. I spin something out, but (it's one of my thorns in the flesh) it gets too long. For the moment I'm holding back and now a new notion has bubbled through the brain: Why not ask the entire ThTh readership to offer "revisions or alternatives" (as one of you asked me for) to what Pastor King offered in the aftermath of that horrendous day.

And THEN, step two, I'd ask four local Crossings folks here in St. Louis—two men (one parish pastor, one lay preacher) and two women (one parish pastor, one lay-preacher) to be the readers of these homilettes. The quartet would then decide which ones we pass on to the rest of the listserve folks—for good or ill.

That's what I'm asking from you. If all 600-plus of you on the

primary listserve respond, we'll have enough material to take us through to ThTh #500—a mere 34 posts away—and I could take my third retirement early. If 2% respond, we'll have a dozen.

This is not a contest. No winners will be chosen.

We might see it as an exercise in item #5 of the “many ways” in which “God offers the Gospel,” as Luther puts it in the Smalcald Articles. After listing proclamation, baptism, Lord’s supper and confession/absolution he adds a fifth: “and finally through the mutual conversation and consolation” of Christ’s disciples with one another.

So here’s an invitation to converse and console.

The ONE AND ONLY RULE for the conversation/consolation is this: your c&c message may not exceed 304 words, the actual word count on Pastor King’s original message.

GO for it.

Here’s the text of Pastor King’s message. I copied it from the on-line Journal of Lutheran Ethics May 2007 Volume 7, Issue 5

William H. King is the Lutheran Campus Pastor at Virginia Tech

[1] We gather this afternoon for many purposes: to weep for lost friends and family, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, to seek hope in the shadow of despair, to join our voices in a longing for peace, healing, and understanding greater than any single community of faith, to embrace that which unifies, and to reject the seductive temptation of hatred. We gather to share our hurts and our hopes, our petitions and our prayers. We gather also to drink deeply of religious streams which have refreshed parched peoples for generations. We gather together....Weeping, oh yes, we weep with sighs too deep for words, out of inexpressible

pain-but also affirming the sovereignty of life over death.[2] At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our joys, joys as simple as a glorious spring day on the drill field. We struggle to imagine a future beyond this agony. If we ever harbored illusions that our campus is an idyllic refuge from the violence of the world, they are gone forever. Yet we come to this place to testify that the light of love can not finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, the light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. We can not do everything, but we can do something. We can not banish all darkness but we can, by joining together, push it back. We can not undo yesterday's tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn. As we share light, one with another, we reclaim our campus. Let us deny death's power to rob us of all that we have loved about Virginia Tech. Let us cast our lot with hope in defiance of despair.

If you, gentle reader, are moved right now to compose your own 304 words, STOP right here and do so. Go no further to read what's below. It may distract you.

PART TWO:

GOSPEL PROCLAMATION—ALWAYS A CHALLENGE. . . . AND AT OTHER PLACES, ALL OTHER PLACES.

Every now and then I get called on the carpet for “the Seminex grad we have as pastor.” “The one you sent us is a lemon.” “This one split our congregation and took half of the membership with him to start an independent church.” “Our grad from your place doesn't preach the Gospel, and, possibly even worse, doesn't know that he's not doing it.” I have witnessed “live” instances of this last complaint—and the pain of “he doesn't know that he's not doing it.”

We all know, I trust, that a seminary degree (even one from Seminex—sob!) guarantees nothing. Some folks catch the “Aha!” and some folks don’t. By their fruits, not their sheepskins, you shall know them.

Most recently I was alerted to “one of yours” at Such-and-So Lutheran Church. Its second name is “Herchurch.” The Seminex-grad pastor promotes she-ology, offers “Praying the Goddess Rosary,” invokes “the name of the Cosmic Mother, the Risen Christ, Amen!”

How does this all fit under a Lutheran rubric? Here’s how: “Re-imagining God is very Lutheran – Luther re-imaged God from the traditional angry God (Jesus) with a sword in one hand and a lily in the other while seated above people being sent to hell. Via scripture and reason and trust, Luther re-imaged a loving God of grace and forgiveness. . . . Our Christian/Lutheran feminist prayers and liturgy reach back into the storehouse of tradition to bring forth names as Mother, Shaddai, Sophia, Womb, Midwife, Shekinah, She Who Is. They do so out of renewed insights into the nature of the Gospel empowered by the risen Christ-Sophia.”

So the claim is to be Gospel-grounded. Can’t argue with that. But I need to learn more about the Herchurch-Gospel empowered by Christ-Sophia. There have been other such Gospels in the two millennia of church history, and in some cases they were indeed “other” Gospels.

I imagine that all Seminex grads now pastoring would claim to operate “Gospel-grounded.” If for no other reason than that was the shibboleth of the day during our decade of existence -1973-83. But what is “gospel-grounding?” One favorite in these ThTh postings for answering that is the “double-dipstick.” Timothy Hoyer rang the changes on this Melanchthonian yardstick

a couple of weeks ago (ThTh 459) as he measured the habit of American denominations to make “social statements.” He stirred up a fuss with the bad report card he gave to such ventures, a fuss that hasn’t been reported out to you readers (yet)—that came from some dearest friends.

Back to the double dipstick. Gospel-grounded proclamation and practice must a) use—not mis-use or ab-use or ignore—the merits and benefits of Christ, and that means the BIGGIE benefits at the God-sinner interface, AND b) get those goodies over to the sinners so that they do indeed receive and then enjoy the benefits.

As I coast into my anecdotage in my mid-seventies, I marvel more and more at Bob Bertram’s brilliance in specifying the three movements in the Crossings process—grounding, tracking, crossing. Each one of which is not just a task to be performed, but a skill to be learned. I’ve noted before that this was a further evolution of what Bob (and I too) had learned from “Doc” Caemmerer when he was our homiletics prof—for Bob in the 1940s, for me a decade later.

It is a skill to do the GROUNDING, namely, to dig into a Biblical text and squeeze it hard for its own diagnostic and prognostic data about the case-study at hand in that text—not resting until you’ve gotten to a God-sized problem that will necessitate a Christ-sized remedy. And not just some generic Jesus, but the crucified and risen One.

Next it is a skill to do the TRACKING, to examine folks today, a contemporary slice-of-life, and X-ray it to the same depth as you did with the grounding. Rule of thumb for this in Lutheran lingo is: keep probing the contemporary slice-of-life to see where it too “necessitates Christ.”

Both of those processes entail hard work. But harder still as a

skill is step three—CROSSING the person(s) you've tracked with the diagnostic/prognostic data from your grounding work.

This step 3 is the primal agenda in Christian proclamation. USING Christ's benefits so that the receivers actually GET the benefits. If this doesn't happen, the sermon is a failure. Even if the Grounding and Tracking were brilliantly done, to fail in making crossings is akin to torture. "Smell that good food in the kitchen. I can see that you are starving. Good luck, I hope you somehow get to the kitchen."

In the last two Seminex-grad sermons I witnessed, one forgot to talk about what was in the kitchen. The second one did do that, but never got the goodies out of the kitchen onto a plate in front of our noses. We were left to marvel how wonderful these goodies all were—and then we were sent home with the same empty tummies we'd brought to church when we entered the place. [If I did any additional nosing my way into "Herchurch," it would be to examine what's cooking in the kitchen. The pastor of Herchurch, one of Seminex's brightest and best, my dear friend too, will know what I'd be sniffing for. I wonder what she'd show me.]

I've written something in response to these two pastors. In one case I showed it first to a long-time acquaintance in that congregation, who had sat next to me in the pew. He told me not to send it. It "would hurt too much." In the other case I didn't ask anyone for clearance, sent it and got an appreciative word back.

Here's the one I didn't send:

Dear xxx, I was guest at worship in your congregation, as you know, not long ago. We had a pleasant chit-chat afterwards. Here's some stuff intended to encourage you, though it starts out like you might expect from one of your old profs:

1. I know you want to be feeding your people the Gospel, but in that sermon it didn't happen.
2. Thus we the folks at the trough had a problem, and you the feeder did too.
3. We know that you do want to be feeding us Gospel, but it seems that you don't notice that it was not happening.
4. In keeping with the NT text for that sermon, Jesus healing a deaf man—you too may have a hearing problem in this respect: not being able to hear when you are not feeding your people the Gospel.
5. There are objective criteria for checking that out. It's not a subjective matter.
6. Just as there are objective criteria for whether a medical doctor is fulfilling her calling: Do the patients get better, or do they stay sick?
7. You most likely had Doc Caemmerer, or George Hoyer, or Andy Weyermann as your homiletics prof at Seminex. I know their individual paradigms for preaching the Gospel. Thus I know that all three of them would have told you that your sermon on the day we were there "needs a little work" to make it Gospel proclamation.
8. It's possible that you were borrowing from someone else's prepared material. And that's not necessarily bad. Bad is when borrowed material itself does not proclaim the Gospel. Then Gospel-committed preachers have got to "fix" the defective stuff.
9. You may/may not remember that line from Apology 4 in the Lutheran Confessions that we hyped in Seminex days: when some passage (or package) proposed for use in a Christian congregation is Gospel-less, then you have to "add the Gospel promise."
10. Another of the shibboleths from Seminex was the old "double dipstick" that Melancthon uses in Apology IV. You measure the OK-ness of any proposed teaching or

preaching by testing it for two things: 1) Does it really *USE* the merits/benefits of Christ as it makes its pitch, or just *MENTION* them as part of the prose? Mere mention fails the test. 2) Do these benefits actually get across to the folks—the issue of transfer/transmission—so that they get these goodies woven into their own lives?

11. Both of these sides of double-dipstick measuring are objective. You can talk about them. You can put them on the table. You can measure a sermon. You can see when in a specific sermon each side measured by the dipstick—or one, but not the other—or neither—did indeed happen, and when it didn't.
12. That sermon when we were in the congregation was a winsome series of Jesus material. All of that true. But none of it passes the double dipstick test. It's "fides historica" stuff. Nor does it pass Caemmerer's "Goal, Malady, Means," or George Hoyer's "Problem, Point, Power." [I can't remember what Weyermann's matrix was.]
13. Once more, the issue is not "Did you pass the Caemmerer test?" It's did the Good News get proclaimed, the stuff that Christ authorizes you to keep on telling us? Did it get over to us, yes "on our plate" in front of us? I know you want to do that with all your might. I want that to happen too—both for you and for all us parishioners everywhere. Be glad to continue the conversation.

[Here endeth the message never sent to the Seminex alum.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Cheers! Ed