

How the Distinction of Law and Gospel Shapes My Preaching

Title in Conference Brochure:

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Title in "Conference at a Glance"

Preaching the Augsburg 'Aha!'

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One of the most helpful things I ever learned about preaching has to do with the importance of cultivating imagery and metaphors. I also learned from the late Walter Bouman to start any talk with lighthearted things. So, some metaphors and similes, supposedly gleaned from high school papers by composition teachers behaving as humor-vultures. I got these from colleague Matt Becker; hopefully, he hasn't already used them here.

- His thoughts tumbled in his head, making and breaking alliances like underpants in a dryer without Cling Free.
- Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever.
- From the attic came an unearthly howl. The whole scene had an eerie, surreal quality, like when you're on vacation in another city and Jeopardy comes on at 7:00 p.m. instead of 7:30.
- John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.

- Shots rang out, as shots are wont to do.
- He spoke with the wisdom that can only come from experience, like a guy who went blind because he looked at a solar eclipse without one of those boxes with a pinhole in it and now goes around the country speaking at high schools about the dangers of looking at a solar eclipse without one of those boxes with a pinhole in it.

Those may or may not have any application to my topic, but at least these are pretty clear, self-explanatory.

There seem to be two titles for my presentation, neither of which I can remember offering myself, which probably means I didn't meet a deadline, and our program coordinators then scrambled to provide something. Both are good enough titles. I'll talk about both subjects.

The first title could refer to history: How did the law-gospel distinction come to shape my preaching? Or, it could refer to method: How does this distinction continually function as a shaper of my preaching?

For as long as I can remember, I knew there was a distinction between law and gospel because the language of law and gospel was common parlance where I grew up—in a parsonage, in a small town full of Lutherans (and Catholics, who only cared about law, we were told). But in truth, I didn't *know* the distinction, nor did I really *know* the gospel. I grew up believing that we were right, and the Catholics (along with everyone else) were wrong. That was my good news, and also my faith. We were right, thank goodness. We had the correct doctrines and the right code word. (I was taught in parochial school that LCMS people wouldn't be the only people in heaven; others who mistakenly, or perhaps defiantly, believed LCMS doctrine would be there, too, even if they were officially and ostensibly Methodist or Catholic. But

somehow, and for whatever reason, you had to affirm Missouri doctrine to be saved.) What was that doctrine? It had six chief parts: Inerrant Bible. Six-24/hr-Day Creation. Infant Baptism. Real Presence. Absolutely no dancing! And I didn't know it at the time: Women Kept in their Place.

The whole thing also seemed like a code-word game. God had established a secret code word, somewhat as it happened on the old Groucho Marx show, "You Bet Your Life," when the rubber chicken would fall from the ceiling when someone unsuspectingly said the magic word, but more like the codes that spies and soldiers use when crossing battleground perimeters. The code word was "Jesus." Unfortunately, others thought it was "Buddha," or, "Mohammed," or whatever. So blessed we were to know the code-word!

That made preaching work like this:

LAW: You're lousy, no damned good, a poor miserable sinner.

GOSPEL: Jesus died for your sins. You've got to believe in Jesus! (And the six chief parts, which I eventually learned we call "the gospel and all its articles.")

It was also apparent that going to church was at the center of everything. There were Lutherans and Catholics, all right. But also those who went to church, and those who didn't. It was hard to tell which were worse off, Catholics or those who didn't "go to church." Just as today, it was sometimes hard to tell popular religion from official Lutheranism.

To be honest, I don't know what folks meant to teach me. But that's what I learned. And I went off to LCMS's notorious "system schools" to learn how to convince others that we were right, they were wrong. "Come, join us. See things our way!"

I know this curious indoctrination still happens. I recently had an LCMS high school senior in my office, visiting as a

prospective student, and he informed me that he will be the next St. Augustine. So, he will come to VU be a pre-seminary student. But, he wondered, where were our courses in polemics (which he pronounced po-LEEM-ics) and apologetics? He wanted to learn how to do battle, and to prove that he was right.

I suspect now that I would never have known what the gospel was, or how to distinguish it from law, or preach it, without several things having happened to me.

1. I lost my faith. Walking, talking, real-live catechism that I was, I discovered that I knew all the answers, but not all the questions. Moreover, I wasn't right about everything. This happened at Concordia Senior College. Among many small steps on way to being found: Fritz Rusch momentarily revealed his doubts one day, almost by accident. A paper assignment for a history class at seminary that brought me into contact with the Fritz article in LCMS's 75th anniversary volume, in which the author tells of confessing to then-president C. F. W. Walther the loss of his faith.

2. All these finally taught me from experience what I'd memorized as a child: "I believe that I cannot. . . believe. BUT. . ." (Small Catechism, Third Article explanation.) If there's any hope for my connection to God, it's God who must hold on. I cannot.

3. I fell, fortunately, under the influence of Robert Bertram. Back then, what you now call "crossing," he taught as "programming a pericope." We did diagnosis and prognosis. And I gradually learned that we had never, ever finished diagnosis until we got ourselves to the point of recognizing we were not only cussers, drinkers, church-skippers, and whore-mongers, but we were dead as ducks in self-righteous God-supplanting. Moreover, we sad, lost souls were not

only victims of the world's nasty cliques and machinery, we had misled ourselves into the darkest alleyways of despair by insisting on finding our own way out of the mire. Then, when the diagnosis said "dead on arrival," we could do prognosis, and prognosis always began with the cross. But in my own mind, I was still mostly doing "theology about the cross," not yet "theology of the cross." I did soteriology in a typical way. Jesus death was a transaction that started the reversal of death under the law toward life under the gospel. I've learned theology *of* the cross since then, but more on that later. And always in Bob Bertram's treatment there was an *image*, a prevailing metaphor, that dominated the "programming" of the pericope. We inhabited a wilderness story; or we had a clothing problem; or had begun a misguided building venture.

4. I took a turn teaching the Lutheran Confessions early in my Valpo career, and it finally dawned on me how central to everything in that collection are the assumptions of Apology IV. And since that article is about knowing the gospel when you see it, it's about preaching. I cannot help but ask two things of every sermon—does it waste the death of Christ, or honor it as necessary and sufficient for reconciling us to God? And does it comfort penitent hearts?

5. A Phyllis Tribble lesson became important, too—one must wrestle a text like Jacob did the night stranger, asserting: "I will not let you go until you bless me." I may limp, but I'll leave with blessing and a new name. (Or as Ed said last night, our task is more than preaching the text; it's preaching the GOSPEL!)

All of this has made me one of those insufferable sermon critics (most of the time working secretly). I cannot quit diagnosing, then looking for signs of prognosis in others' sermons. And I cannot avoid a critique of the master image or prevailing

metaphor of a sermon. And I can't help asking whether I've heard anything that necessitates Christ, or whether I've been thrown back on my own devices.

I hear plenty of preaching these days that lacks gospel. Why? I theorize that either folks don't know the gospel (like my young students, many of whom think and talk much as I did at their age) or they don't believe it, or they think it's irrelevant and too small a thing to waste time preaching (which seems the case with many of my LCMS and ELCA preaching peers). My students still think that the gospel is: "We must try harder to be better Christians!!!" It's *opinio legis*, but perhaps they have grown up listening to preachers who are mostly frustrated CEO's of small not-for-profits, angry that no one seems to care as much as they do about the work of the church.

Summaries of recent sermons I've heard:

On Epiphany (at a funeral; LCMS preacher) – We don't follow the light very well. Louis followed the light. So should we.

Epiphany 1 (ELCA preacher) – We don't show up very well in the world as God's people. We have resisted the light and not proclaimed God's mercy effectively. Why? Life is tough. So, here's the solution: we should wear our faith on our sleeves.

Two days ago, on Epiphany 4, I heard two sermons: 1) Christ's words to Nazareth folks stripped them naked, exposed their self-centeredness, and infuriated them. Gospel: Christ clothes them, and us, in himself. 2) Christ's teaching show us our selfishness and our insistence that God's blessings be ours alone, or at least ours first. How dare God love others! Gospel: God loves everyone. You must believe that!

In some circles and places I hear mostly politics. I think it is proclamation that grows out of liberation theology. It proclaims justice. Often it's called "gentle justice," but it's justice

nevertheless. The primary point is that somebody else is messing up the world and throwing it into a pit of injustice. The poor are suffering, and God prefers the poor over the rich. Ergo, we must be on the side of the poor, and we must become the agents named in Mary's *Magnificat* who cast the mighty down from their thrones and send the rich away empty. (Ed Schroeder sent around an example of such a sermon a few months ago—it had many paragraphs decrying the shortages of food in various countries, including areas in our own, and a final paragraph that said, exactly this briefly, “But God loves us, Jesus died for us, and that alone will change and heal us. Go and feed Lazarus.”)

Such things make me think that many preachers today consider the gospel and the forgiveness of sins as just silly, out-dated concerns that we don't have time for because economic problems are so grave we must take care of them first. If there's time and energy left over, perhaps we might talk a little gospel. (If nothing else, I find this sorely patronizing, as if the poor have no concerns save economic ones. They aren't real people like us, with complex hearts and minds that need diagnosing and prognosing; they're just victims of the system who need a check, land, or power.)

I still believe that the gospel calls church into being. *Only* the gospel calls the church into being. The law, like the law of liberation theology, calls political movements into being, and such movements play the games politicians always play—I'm right, you're wrong, and the more quickly I get power from you and exercise it my way, the better off the world will be. That's the true nature of the community that much of what says it is church today has actually become.

Gospel is always a surprise. An 'Aha!' Augsburg or otherwise. In a way, so is the law, when radically applied. When we really, finally hear it, even the law surprises us, because we've been

so busy denying and resisting it that we couldn't listen. We're dead! In trespasses and sins! We have made (for) ourselves gods. And to hell with the true God!

And right there, in hell, comes the surprising moment, at least for me, when and where gospel can finally be heard. When we finally land, as we inevitably do, in hell. The 'Aha!' comes when we find you-know- who there.

It's not only a great surprise, of course, but foolishness. A joke! Please remember this. The gospel is nothing if not a really big joke. This evening I'll play with my favorite scene of gospel comedy, the oddly humorous conversation among the crucified fellows in Luke 23, those guys up there making plans for their future while fixed to crosses outside Jerusalem.

I have learned the gospel through the experience of wrestling certain texts. Among the more revealing, personal moments I'd list. . .

An encounter with John 13:31-35, an Easter season gospel lesson, which begins, "When he had gone out. . ." and continues with the teaching of the "new commandment." He, of course, is Judas. With him out there betraying us, we can't rely any longer on the old commandment that we love our neighbors as ourselves. No, we need to love as Christ does. Despite what John thinks of Judas, Jesus' new commandment, requiring that we love as God loves, not as we love ourselves, sends us out where Judas roams. To hell perhaps. Because we might end up as Judas. Indeed, each of us plays the role of Judas to someone, and not only to Christ.

Isaiah 25:6-9, another Easter season lesson, continued on to verses 10 and following, provides a revelation about what's at the bottom of the mountain. The great feast still finds the Moabites eating our feces and swimming in our urine while we share wine and other delights up top. Where in this picture

would we find the crucified Christ? How long does it take to get ancestor Ruth's Moabite blood out of his system?

Matthew 25, a Christ the King lesson in the parable of the last judgment, and the question concerning where the members of the body of Christ belong in the division of flocks and herds in that judgment scene. And, of course, where does the Christ himself, who taught us to go where the condemned are, ends up in that scene? Won't the tireless Shepherd of Matthew 18 have to keep on looking for every last lost one before the party can start?

So here is a piece of my method: "WHERE DO WE FIND THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN THIS PICTURE?" I must ask. If we find him, we may find the gospel surprise.

Theology of cross is not finding a way to describe some transaction that happens in the crucifixion. Rather, theology of the cross, which lets us see things as they really are, recognizes that each of us gets crucified—in baptism, and then all through life in place after place as we're nailed by the law. But lo, and behold, look who we get for company when we end up crucified! In his company, hell is unhelled— though it is still not pretty, at least as the world judges things.

Preaching in this way demands rigorous honesty about our condition, and the deceptive twists and turns of our hearts, minds, and libidos. I have had the curse-become-blessing of getting nailed for lots of things. It's no longer hard to see that I'm wrong about everything. I repent of it all, every day, except for my baptism.

But it has blessings you can't know until living in repentance. For one thing, we are, like Christ himself, the veteran of Golgatha, blasphemy proof – once you've been crucified, what else could someone do to you? Laugh at you? Mock you? Make a

joke of you?

People also ask of *theologia crucis* preachers, “But where is your joy?” I say, listen to us sing.

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