

How I Spent my Sabbatical

Colleagues:Thirteen weeks ago—after five years of weekly Thursday postings—I declared “enough already!” and took a time out. Since I have no de facto boss, self-bestowal was the only way to get a sabbatical.

I told you then that I found encouragement to do so in a prayer from Sister Teresa of Avila:

“Lord, you know that day by day I am getting older—and one day I’ll simply be old.

Protect me from the compulsion to HAVE TO say something on every occasion.

Save me from the great passion to straighten out the affairs of others.

Teach me to be reflective and helpful, but not yearning to be in charge.

Teach me the marvelous wisdom that I might be wrong.

Keep me as lovable as you possibly can.”

And I did recite that prayer during the interim. As I get back into the saddle, you’ll have to decide if it was answered.

“How I Spent my Sabbatical” may be of less interest for you than for me as I chronicle what I did during the past three months, but I’m tabulating it here initially for my own information. And to remember in print what I hope not to forget.

June

Jury duty. Taught final session in Lutheran Confessions for Luth. School of Theology in St. Louis, read papers, turned in grades. Collected and posted five bags of books to our mission venture in Manipur, India. Flew to Chicago for the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology. Listened to Roy

Blount Jr. introduce his book on Robert E. Lee at the Art Museum. Joined Audrey Vanderbles at "Old Trinity" (Walther's church) to celebrate her 40 yrs of deaconess ministry. Helped stuff the Corssings summer newsletter.

July,

Sermon and liturgy at St. Paul's UCC church in Marthasville, Missouri. Attended Crossings board meeting. Watched son Nathan play a Nazi role in a local production of The Diary of Anne Frank.

Then three weeks and 5000 miles by car. First via Omaha (where we crashed with former student now LCMS pastor) to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada for some days in the gallery as guests at the 10th assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. Many many happy rendezvous with earlier mission-connections from all over the world. Hosted for our six days there by Canadian Mennonite friends from 48 years ago, the time when they and we were grad students in Hamburg Germany, we learned of Mennonitism first hand, worship included. Then on to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan for a weekend with former deaconess student now chaplain in a Lutheran home for the aged (one of her two Sunday services we attended was in the Alzheimers unit). Then to rural eastern Montana to visit a Seminex alum (treats were a day at the county fair, riding high in the combine cabin with one of her farmer members harvesting mustard with his mega machinery on his 12,000 acre ranch, and finding a rattlesnake—live—on the front steps when she went to show us her country church).

All the way west across Montana (it's big) to the town of Polson on Flathead Lake beyond the continental divide. Stopped off on the way at Little Big Horn National Park (Custer's Last Stand) and the Park at the Headwaters of the Missouri River (since we live at its other end in St. Louis), and the creme-d-la-creme dinosaur museum in Bozeman. Weekend stay and Sunday services in

Polson with another Semtex alum. Spent Saturday morning picking cherries—some of which we actually got all the way back to St. Louis a week later.

From Polson—with 3,000-plus already on the odometer—we finally started heading home. Via Yellowstone National Park, the Beartooth Highway, Big Horn mountains, finessing our way for days through the hundreds of thousands (sic!) Harley-Davidson motorcycles heading to the annual pow-wow in Sturgis, South Dakota. Last place for crashing before we got home was a ranch in Sundance, Wyoming with another former student, who had spent just one year at Semtex back in the 70s. Something triggered a faith-crisis then, so he went back to Sundance where he now carpenters and manages the family ranchland. He wanted to talk, and so we did, late into the night—and then again at breakfast before we said farewell. That'll will have to be a topic for a ThTh posting before I forget it all.

It's already August by the time we get home. We're here for a week—dentist appointments, granddaughter's birthday party, monthly luncheon with Semtex goldie-oldies, car rejuvenated—and then off for another fortnight. This time a mere 2K miles north to Wisconsin, ferry across Lake Michigan, back south and west through Michigan, Indiana and Illinois.

Starts with 55th reunion of my Coal Valley (Illinois) High School class plus visit to the farm where I was born (my dad too), and where my youngest brother now manages it in its second century as "the Schroeder place." Then a weekend visit with rellies in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Sunday liturgy at St. Mary's (sic!) Lutheran church there. Visit (quite likely, farewell visit) with Andy Weyermann in Milwaukee, colleague and co-conspirator for fifty years, as his affliction does not abate.

Our northernmost destination is the Door County (Wisconsin)

peninsula—the “Cape Cod” of the Middle West, we are told. There in the resort town of Ephraim (once a Moravian settlement, with the Moravian church still there cheek-by-jowl with the Lutheran one) we settle in for a week’s freebee at the Lutheran parsonage. Well, not quite freebee. I do the Sunday liturgy and sermon, and then it’s ours for free.

The Sunday is St. Bartholomew’s Day Aug. 24. Though the day is named after him, there’s nothing about him in the New Testament other than his listing in rosters of the apostles. But that’s only in the rosters of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John doesn’t know him. In his place John puts Nathaniel (who is never mentioned in Mt. Mk. or Lk.). Somewhere in the tradition the two were declared to be the same person. So St. Bartholomew, his day burned into church history with the mass murder of French Huguenots on the night of Aug. 23-24, 1572, gets a Nathaniel text as the Gospel for his day.

And in that Nathaniel text (John 1: 43-51) Jesus amazes Nathaniel by seeing him under the fig tree ever before they meet (possibly a reference even farther back to Nathaniel’s infancy where the fig tree designates a mother’s place for nursing her child). But Jesus relegates that marvel to insignificance by telling Nathaniel that in following Jesus he’ll see “heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” I glombed onto “heavens opened” as the fundamental image for the day.

So with unopened tin-cans (yes, two of them. See below.) and can-opener in the pulpit, borrowed from the parsonage kitchen, the preacher presented Jesus as the “heaven-opener.” Access to God “as Father” being closed apart from Jesus—especially in John’s Gospel (e.g., 14:6)—the proclamation parsed out as follows:

BAD NEWS: Heaven Closed. Cans closed. No Opener.

1. Daily life under "Heaven Closed." The O.T. reading for the day, Exodus 19:1-6, spells out the "heaven closed" option: "IF you keep my commandments, THEN you are my people." Living daily life by "If ... Then..."
2. Worse yet, Trusting "If, then," and not the Heaven-Opener. Also trusting "if/then" in day-to-day life with others. Being closed cans ourselves.
3. Worst of all, both cans—the God-can, and the me-can—stay closed. No possibility for the "me-can" or the "God-can" to be opened. Incurvature into oneself concludes in incarceration into oneself. Canned for eternity. **GOOD NEWS: Life with Heaven Opened.**
4. Christ the Can-opener. Opens the God-can to expose God as "Father" and not as If/then evaluator. He also opens the can of human self-incarceration. What it all cost to be that can-opener—both cans—to cope with the if/then realities of closed-can life under the law.
5. "Follow me." First of all to God as Father. Call it faith. Take no detours.
6. "Follow me." Second into our life in the world with other canny folks. Take no detours. Living as opened cans, as can-openers. "As the Father sent me, so send I you." Opening for others the closed cans of their lives—both the closed God-can and the closed self-can that vexes us all apart from Christ the Can-Opener. Second lesson (1 Cor. 12:27-31a) specs out the multiplicity of opened cans operating as the Body of Christ. [Possible puns too humorous to mention. It's uncanny.]

Here endeth the sermon outline.

The "free-bee week" passed before we got used to doing nothing. Well, not quite nothing. With a whole parsonage available we

invited relatives to join us for the standard Door County musts: a fish-boil evening feast, a pontoon boat cruise on Green Bay and the de rigeur Swedish pancake breakfast at Al Johnson's where real goats graze on the real grass that grows on the restaurant's roof. In and around Door County are three Seminex-alum pastors, so that brought three invitations out.

For the final days of August we crossed Lake Michigan on the ferry, visited Indonesia missionary colleagues (from 1999) now retired in Holland, Michigan. Sobering and celebrative at the same time was last Thursday's memorial service for Walt Rast in South Haven, Michigan. Walt was my seminary classmate, my Valparaiso University colleague of many years, a world-renowned Biblical archeologist and Old Testament scholar. Walt has a permanent exhibit in the Smithsonian (Washington D.C.) from the ancient site of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then came our first-ever visit at St. Augustine's House (Oxford, Michigan), the only Lutheran monastery in the USA. Besides the liturgical life we enjoyed the extras of a community hymnsing, the annual Fellowship Day lecture, and the celebrative dedication and raising of the bell for the new chapel.

Couldn't resist stopping off at Valparaiso University for a Saturday soiree with colleagues and the Sunday liturgy in the Chapel of the Resurrection. And home by sunset that evening.

That may be more than you really wanted to know. Marie's handwritten journal of 100-plus pages is the real narrative that puts the flesh and sinew on the skeleton I've just sketched.

Upcoming ThTh postings may add more meat to the bones above. To wit:

1. The Lutheran World Federation (I rejoiced that my brightest and best student in the Lutheran Confessions

during our 1997 gig in Lithuania, Milita Poskiene, got elected to the LWF Council. With her on board there may be hope for the LWF after all.)

2. The memento mori of the deaths of 3 dear buddies: Tim Lull, Dick Jungkuntz and Walt Rast. Plus the news awaiting us when we got home that the family in that car swept off the Interstate just last Saturday night by a flash-flood in Kansas, with only the father/husband surviving, were relatives of folks near and dear to us.
3. Some thoughts about the Mennonites.
4. For the umpteenth time a return to "the law's third use," Lutheran lingo for using God's law as resource in living the Christian life. That hobby horse of mine resurfaced both at the Crossings board meeting where dissent in the Crossings Community from the "party-line" was discussed, and in the too many legalist sermons I heard during my galavanting sabbatical. To adhere to the counsel of St. Theresa, I'll not merely moan about the third-users, but make a pitch instead for the "second use" of the Gospel as the only power-pack for living as God's new creations. One of you has given me a new image for that: The Energizer Battery Bunny never stopping to beat his drum for his cause. One scheme I have is to do an RSV (revised Schroeder version) of the Epistle to the Galatians. I'm growing in my conviction that Galatians is the first-ever apostolic word to "third users" in the church's history. Paul's angle in Galatians, so it seems to me, is to say: You wish to re-appropriate the Law for living the new life in Christ because your Gosepl is too small. Or even more vividly: Your Christ is too small. Magnify the Lord, and you'll see not only that you don't "need" Moses, but that Moses can't has no fuel to energize what Christ creates and where the Spirit leads.
5. Atheism. Reflecting on the discussion at the ranch in

Sundance, Wyoming, where I blurted out: "Seems to me that the God you don't believe in is one I don't believe in either."

6. Items raised by the 12 ThTh essays posted during my time away are also worthy of some attention. Especially Bob Bertram's classic on Revelation.
7. And the anniversary of September 11, 2001 just around the corner with repentance unknown in the American Empire as it plunges forward into Apocalypse Now.

Enough already.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder.