

In Blessed Remembrance

Colleagues,

“Time like an ever-rolling stream / soon bears us all away. / We fly forgotten as a dream / dies at the opening day.”

Is there anywhere in English hymnody a line more doleful? Is there in hymnody of any kind a sharper reminder of why we need Christ?

It strikes me again this week that horrid Death gets more press than it deserves. Sure, as an instance of the “Accuso!” that God’s Law hurls at sinners, it’s doubtless the loudest. But it isn’t the last. Nor is it the worst. A few weeks ago I watched a three-year-old striving as three-year-olds will to command the attention of every other living being in the room, to that end pitting her will against the parent who had summoned her to the dinner table where everyone else was waiting to dig in. At first the ploy worked, all present attending to the drama as mother and father took turns pleading with her to quit her misbehaving. But at a certain point the adults simply turned away, focused on each other, and began the meal as if the child were not there. In less than twenty seconds she was perched at the table where she belonged. Out of the bones of babes, to tweak a famous phrase.

What’s worse than Death? Death’s consequence, that’s what. The pebble plops in the stream, the ripples vanish, the conversation of the living rolls on without you and pays you no heed. One hundred years from now it will be with me as if I had never been born. One thousand years from now the digital traces I’m busy piling up these days (as are we all) will have long since been scrambled beyond all recognition. In that day it will be with me as with Bishop Berkeley’s falling tree. With none on hand to

perceive that I was, I will not have happened. "Dust you are. To dust you shall you return." He-Who-Said-That wasn't kidding. His Son once spoke of outer darkness, the very thing that three-year-old I mentioned had intimations of. In the lighted hall the living feast, as much on talk and laughter as on food and drink. At the heart of the former is shared memory. Such sounds as leak through the walls into the cold and bitter night contain no mention at all of those the night has swallowed. No wonder the darkness rattles with the noise of gnashing teeth.

Enter Christ whose immediate gifts for those who have died are, first, the capacity to remember them, each and every one, and second-far better still-his fierce, unyielding determination to do just that. Did he not die himself to save us from oblivion?

You'll know why I'm thinking along these lines if you read the note we sent you on Sunday evening. To repeat, in case you didn't: last week's contributor, Pr. Todd Murken, was fatally injured in a bicycle accident this past Friday. A day earlier you had gotten Part One of his "Play-By-Play Liturgy." Part Two was due this week. You won't find it here, at least not yet. Better, it seems to me, that we should pause to thank the Lord Christ for a faithful, gifted servant, and after that to praise him for keeping Todd in his own most blessed remembrance as yet another of God's cherished saints to whom the Promise forever applies.

I didn't know Todd well. Nor did most of you, I suspect. One member of our editorial team didn't know him at all. The likes of us would leave him forgotten within a day or two of next week's post. Shame on us, but life rolls on; or so we'll want to mumble in our standard, useless effort to excuse our shame. Confessing that, let Christ be thanked as well, and from the bottom of every heart, for remembering on our behalf, as we cannot, and granting us the credit for it. There's a reason, by

the way, why Christ's death was an explicitly shameful death. How else would he silence Shame's whining "Accuso," the one we can't shrug off? This too is how we find ourselves, with Todd, among those who are being saved.

I mentioned last week that Todd did his doctoral work on Eucharistic theology. I wonder what he made of that final line in the Words of Institution, "Do this in remembrance of me." Here's my own present take on it: we remember Christ precisely because he remembers us all. Comes the wonder: in remembering him alone, we can't help but remember each other, including the countless each-others that he alone knows. Blessed remembrance indeed! Something to think about, perhaps, the next time you go to the Table.

Meanwhile, in lieu of Part Two of Todd's piece—as intimated, we've pushed that off till next week—we send along tributes from three colleagues who did know him well. Like everything else we may say about each other, these tributes are fragile and fleeting, read today, swept quickly away in tomorrow's flood of information. Read and ponder anyway. Todd's Christ will be pleased. Then he'll stash what you read in the one mind, God's, where all good words abide forever, above all the ones that Christ himself keeps saying about us all. In light of that, a prayer:

"O God our help in ages past, / our hope for years to come: / be
Thou our guard while troubles last / and our eternal home."

—*Isaac Watts*

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Encomia: The Rev Dr. Todd B. Murken, 1955-2012

From the Rev. Dr. Kathryn A. Kleinhans, Professor of Religion, Wartburg College—

Todd and I were good friends for over 30 years. We first met in fall 1981, when we began our M.Div. studies at Christ Seminary – Seminex in St. Louis. Starting with internship, we became lifelong theological correspondents, exchanging long letters and processing our experiences through Law/Gospel lenses. We disagreed about some important issues in the life of the church, but such disagreements were neither rancorous nor final. Todd had a powerful drive to understand where others were coming from. In recent years the long letters were replaced by equally long e-mails, full of questions and of nuanced argument. Some people play chess by mail. Todd and I did theology by mail.

Todd was a faithful godfather to our firstborn, whom he typically addressed not as Christopher but as *cristoferos*, always reminding him that his baptism made him a “bearer of Christ.”

Todd found great joy in his marriage to Julie, and as a guest in their home, I was able to witness the grace that they reflected to each other. I received news of Todd’s death while attending an ecumenical seminar in Strasbourg, France. Only five weeks earlier, Todd and Julie and I had gathered around an atlas in their kitchen, discussing the conference and mapping out my trip.

In seminary, I learned of Todd’s Advent discipline. He listened every day during Advent to Handel’s “Messiah”—but only through the Passion narrative. He would not listen to the full oratorio until Christmas Day. Such personal discipline was characteristic of Todd, who believed that patience and preparation laid the foundation for an even fuller joy. “May they rest in peace,” we

often say of the blessed dead. I imagine, though, that Todd is not resting. Surely he is among those gathered around the throne of God, singing an unending "Hallelujah Chorus."

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From Cathy Lessmann, Office and Business Manager, the Crossings Community-

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work with Todd when he served as editor of our Crossings newsletter. Not only did I learn to appreciate his intelligence and his unique ability to articulate the Gospel in easy-to-understand language, but I found him to be a most gentle and kind "boss" to work with. Todd loved the outdoors, he loved to bike, kayak, backpack, sail—you name it, he loved it. Back in 2002 we (my husband Gary and I) went sailing with him and Giselle in the Virgin Islands, and I remember how he absolutely relished the experience. I remember how considerate he was when we scuba dived and I was still fearful. I remember having long, intriguing theological conversations with him and how he always tried to converse at my level. Most of all, I remember that Todd believed in Jesus and that it was evident by the way he lived and interacted with all of us.

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From the Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl, President of the Crossings Community-

Next week's Thursday Theology will come to us with both joy and sadness. The joy, of course, will arise from the fresh engagement with the gospel that it will give in continuation with what we read last week. The sadness is that Todd Murken, the suffering servant of the Suffering Servant who will give it to us is with us no more—at least not in a way that he can preach the gospel to us with his distinctively winsome prose. Having died so unexpectedly, we commend him to the Lord. Who

would have guessed that this would be the last drop of refreshment God would squeeze out of Todd for us to enjoy? Soli Deo Gloria.

Todd was a cherished member and active participant in the Crossings Community. Having studied under Bertram and Schroeder at Seminex and achieving his doctorate in Systematic Theology under Bob Bertram, he was a remarkable teacher and practitioner of law-gospel theology and the Crossings Six-Step Method for elucidating it. To the blessing of many, he brought that commitment to his work both in the parishes he served and in the East Central Synod of Wisconsin, ELCA where he oversaw and taught in its Lay School of Theology.

Todd has served the Crossings Community primarily through his gift of writing. In a time of great transition, he masterfully took over and edited the Crossings Newsletter, writing major articles on how the gospel crosses into the lives of real Christians. Todd also contributed by way of his probing intellect. When his brow was furled you could be sure that he was analyzing what was being said with evangelical seriousness. I had not known that Todd had published a book (his dissertation adapted) until I read about it in Jerry Burce's introduction of him in last week's Thursday Theology: *Take and Eat, and Take the Consequences*. I plan to get it.

On behalf of the Crossings Community, I extend our deepest sympathy to all who knew Todd in this life and who now mourn his loss, especially, his wife, Julie, his two children, Nathaniel and Anastasia, and his family, friends, and parishioners. We take comfort in those words of Paul when he says "whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." Todd is the Lord's. The promise of resurrection is his and our heritage.