

John Damm's Homily at John Tietjen's Funeral

Colleagues,

For this festival day, the Annunciation of Our Lord, something special: John Damm's sermon at John Tietjen's funeral. Both John D. and John T. impacted me significantly in my very first year as a student at Concordia Seminary. I came to the Sem. with no "prep school connections" having done a B.A. at Valparaiso University instead. All the other entering seminarians came via one of Missouri Synod's many such prep schools, actually "Gymnasium" leftovers that the Saxon immigrants had brought with them as their educational system. Because I was prep-less, there was no old school network awaiting me when I got to the St. Louis seminary.

For reasons not totally clear to me, I fell in with "the Bronxville crowd" from New York City – a strange match if there ever was one for this midwestern farm boy. Besides John D. and John T., there was a third John, John Lemkul. First, Second and Third John adopted me as a candidate for cultural development. That meant season tickets to the symphony [I had never even heard that there were three B's, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms] and then the post-concert culture of pizza and Chianti at their favorite Italian restaurant. Talk about culture shock! Both for me and for them!

I still have a photo from 1952 of all three Johns carrying my luggage (sic!) as I along with classmate Dick Baepler boarded the Holland-America Lines' "Zuider Kruis" (Southern Cross) in New York City to sail off for a year as exchange student seminarian in Germany.

But that was long ago, the middle of the last century. So it is more than just Seminex nostalgia that prompts me to pass on this homily to you. My connection to, and affection for, John D. and John T. goes way back.

Here's the text John Damm sent me along with his permission to pass it on to the Crossings Community.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

***Mass of the Resurrection
John H. Tietjen
Thursday of the Sixth Week after the Epiphany
19 February 2004
Trinity Lutheran Church
Fort Worth, Texas***

Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; Saint John 11:21-27

How fitting for us to begin this Mass of the Resurrection singing Martin Luther's hymn, Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands (LBW, 134). It's John Tietjen's choice, and it certainly establishes the right theological tone for this celebration of John's faith and life. When he made the selection, he had no way of knowing we would sing it on the day after the Lutheran Church commemorates the death of the Reformer.

>From the vantage point of this pulpit, it's obvious that people from every walk of life who knew John have come together

to remember him, to reflect on his life's work and to rejoice. Those are the three strong verbs I want to use today: Remember, Reflect, Rejoice.

This morning Trinity Church has become a prestigious portrait gallery that can vie with its distinguished neighbor just a few blocks away. Each one of us brings our unique perspective, knowledge and memories to this service. Each one of us has a personal portrait of John that is treasured. I propose to share my portrait of John with you. I hope, after the committal service, you will take the time to share your portrait of him with his family in the fellowship hall.

First, I remember John as husband, father and grandfather. His romance with Ernestine began about sixty years ago in a little parish church in Queens, New York. Over the years that romance matured and developed into a portrait that speaks of devotion, faithfulness and love. When John looked into Ernestine's eyes fifty years ago last June and said: I DO, he meant it with all his heart, mind and spirit. And things never changed.

I must take this occasion to say a special word about Ernestine. Through thick and thin, she was to John what "Kate" was to Martin Luther: a refuge in time of trouble. She was his source of strength right up to his final hour on earth.

>From that marriage came three daughters and a son. Today they rise up to call their father "Blessed." When they were growing up, John had, for want of a more apt description, a law-gospel relationship with them. He established the rules and regulations for living together, and they were expected to keep them. It's not always easy living with someone who claimed that while he wasn't always right – he was never wrong! But his children always knew that the bottom line was love – an intense, deep, all-encompassing fatherly love. Look how it

worked: four beautiful adults who live their Christian faith and life with integrity and love. And in these years of their Dad's illnesses, they have been as caring and devoted as possible.

They made John a grandfather and what delight he took in being with his grandchildren, really enjoying their company and proud of their achievements. All of you were a special blessing to your grandfather.

I remember John the colleague in ministry in the parish and the seminary. It's worth noting that John began and completed his public ministry in the parish, first in New Jersey and then, believe it or not, in Texas! Those parish experiences were pivotal and informed every other expression of ministry he exercised in the church. His loving pastoral heart and outreach are still fresh in the memories of you dear people at Trinity, and that same portrait of him is still treasured by those he served fifty years ago.

When he became president of the largest Lutheran seminary in the world, that pastoral heart was not left behind. Former students will say "Amen" to that. Today that pastoral sense of vocation John had is very much alive at The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in the chair of pastoral ministry created in his honor. The incumbent of that chair is with us today, Professor Mark Bangert. I know John would be pleased.

Is it a mere coincidence that this very day of John's funeral is the 30th anniversary of the birth of Concordia-Seminary-in-Exile, affectionately known among us as Seminex?! I think the Saint Louis seminary portrait needs a few extra brush strokes. Some of the veterans of those tumultuous years are here today and know in their hearts that their fearless leader never let them down, not even in the darkest days of controversy. The

Jonah story probably became a symbol of the battle being waged about biblical interpretation in the Missouri Synod at the time, but John never acquiesced to the demand that he toss a few colleagues overboard to save the ship.

Given the theological climate at many seminaries today, the portrait of John we colleagues and students and ELIM supporters hold in our hearts could be a model for other churches and seminaries in their time of conflict. John tried, with every gift God had given him, to help everyone realize that we Lutherans cannot club each other into submission with the law and synodical resolutions and mock trials. Instead, he always pointed us to the Gospel and to the metanoia (the new mind) the Gospel can produce. I think we hold that Gospel portrait of him especially dear.

Of course, my portrait of John has to have him wearing his clerical collar and when at the altar, in eucharistic vestments. You know how wholeheartedly he embraced what we now call the evangelical-catholic revival in American Lutheranism with its rich sacramental life. In the parish and in the seminary, good historian that he was, he called us back to our heritage and then pushed us forward into the coming century. Worship was always central.

My portrait of John somehow has to convey his vision of church unity, both Lutheran and ecumenical. His first published book, dedicated to Ernestine, was entitled "Which Way to Lutheran Unity?" (CPH, 1966). In it he built a sound platform for fruitful Lutheran dialogue, a dialogue that ultimately brought significant segments of American Lutheranism together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

His passion for unity reached far beyond Lutheranism, although that's where it always started for him, with the affirmation of

Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession: "For the unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." In the last sermon he preached from this pulpit on Sunday, January 18th, he made reference to the fact that this day was the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Throughout his ministry, the unity of the church was an absolutely essential part of his agenda for living as faithfully and as effectively as he could in a divided church. The John H. Tietjen Endowment Fund being established at Trinity Church will be an annual reminder of John's ecumenical concern.

The burden of John's prayer was not only for Christian unity, but for the well-being of God's people Israel. The Jewish people have always had a special place in his thinking and praying. Having grown up in a part of our country with a strong, vibrant Jewish presence, John made it his interfaith vocation to help undo the mischief we Christians and, in the last century, what we Lutherans have often perpetrated on the chosen people of God in the name of our Christian Messiah.

As you and I remember the portraits of John we treasure, it becomes important to ask: what made the John Tietjen we knew tick? What was it that held all these facets of his complex life together? What made it possible for him to write in the Epiphany Letter he sent us six weeks ago: "In 2004 I begin a journey that leads to the end of my life. I walk it in hope." Let's reflect on that hope – a hope that gave meaning and purpose to his life and everything he was and did.

I suspect you've had enough of this John's remembering that John. Instead let's allow him to speak for himself. Knowing him, isn't that how he would prefer it? He didn't need anyone to speak for him. In the last sermon he preached he said: "I have things I want, in fact need, to say. They are a burden on

my heart, especially the message in today's Gospel (Matthew 16:13-16)." (He's referring to Peter's confession of faith.) "As we say in the language we have developed recently, I have a legacy to leave behind."

What is that legacy? His clear, consistent, constant proclamation of the Gospel: the good news in Peter's confession when he said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Building on the substance of that confession of faith, John said: "Peter's confession makes clear who Jesus is: as Messiah he tells us what he did – as Son of God he did the Messiah's work of bringing God's gracious rule into people's lives. Jesus makes all the difference in how we see God and God's relation to us, what we do with our lives, and what we can expect God to do for us."

In Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, John found and embraced God's gracious plan for the kind of life he would live every day and everywhere no matter what happened. Listen to John's confession of faith: "God is a very present help in trouble, as I am ready to witness. God gives the strength needed for the problems each new day brings. I have placed my life in God's hands. Therefore, I know all will be well, including what happens at death. No, death is not the end of it all. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. God raised Jesus from the dead. Because he lives, I too will live. The Messiah said so." For John that was enough!

The more I reflect on John's confession of faith, the more I am moved to rejoice because John understood that God's plan for him was not to end at the moment of his death. That's why he could conclude his Epiphany letter to us saying: "I look not just to the close of my life but to its culmination."

Here John had in mind what Saint Paul revealed to the

Christians in Corinth about the resurrection of the dead, today's Second Reading. When I was with him last August, he had just finished reading N.T. Wright's book, The Resurrection of the Son of God (Fortress 2003) and had almost completed a review of the book for Currents in Theology and Mission. The review will appear later this year.

John began his review by quoting v. 17-19 of 1 Corinthians 15. It's Paul's response to those Christians in Corinth who argued against the resurrection. He wrote: "If Christ had not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." In his review, John made this comment on those verses: "For me the apostle's point is very personal. If Christ had not been raised, I have been living and proclaiming a lie."

"I share Wright's conviction that the Christian hope for resurrection to the life of the world to come is grounded in Jesus' resurrection on the third day after his death by crucifixion." Then John gave us twenty-first century Christians the reminder that our space-time worldview differs from that of New Testament Christians. For us who live in the world of space-time, bodily resurrection is in the future. We are limited by the space-time constraints of life in this present age.

And now I quote John verbatim: "But God is eternal, and when we die we go to be with God in eternity, which is no longer governed by space-time. We leave space-time behind. For the believer at death the consummation of the age to come is now. There is no waiting in eternity. Bodily resurrection is no longer future but now. So when we lay loved ones to rest in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ' (ELCA Occasional Services,

p.126), we can comfort our hearts with the confidence that, because God raised Jesus from the dead, our loved ones share already now in the resurrection that for us is still in the future."

Now John has become part of that glorious future. This is not pious exaggeration meant to alleviate the pain of our understandable sadness and mourning. We still have to wait for our resurrection before we can see John 's smile of recognition. But the thrilling truth remains: John is alive with Christ's resurrection life right now. Indeed, he is more thrillingly alive than he ever was before, because for him every tear is past, every malignant growth, every infirmity of his increasingly fragile body gone. We have every reason to rejoice!

And we who remain here, bound in our space-time capsule, what about us? We must wait for our resurrection. But our waiting, like John's, can be tempered by our Christian hope. We can let Saint Paul bless us as he blessed his dear Christian friends in Rome: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (15:13).

John S. Damm

Senior Pastor Emeritus

Saint Peter's Church in the City of New York