

Lenten Disciplines

In today's Thursday Theology, Jerry Burce muses on recent trends in Lutheran approaches to Lent, contrasting them with old approaches to the season.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Colleagues:

I wrote last week that I was going to pass along some thoughts about the habit, now current among the Lutherans I know, of encouraging the classic Lenten disciplines as a thing for earnest, thoughtful Christians to pay attention to and practice.

To get started I typed "fasting prayer almsgiving Lutheran" in my browser's Google bar. Here's a puny sample of the results I got, 100,000+ of them. Exhibit 1 was the first entry on the first page. Exhibits 2 and 3 came from slightly deeper in. I plucked all three from up-to-date websites of Lutheran congregations in the U.S. The words in italics are mine, not theirs.

1.

Today we start the season of Lent, a time of emphasis on spiritual practices. The Great Commandment can be an excellent guide to the spiritual practices of Lent: "You shall love the Lord your God with your heart, mind, and soul and your neighbor as yourself."

We are to love God. Prayer helps define our relationship to God.

We are to love our neighbor. The giving of alms and other

support to the poor shows our love for our neighbor.

We are to love ourselves. Fasting is an excellent discipline to help us get more in touch with ourselves.

During this Lenten season, I encourage you to pay attention to your spiritual disciplines.

To which one aches to add: “Do it, and you will live.”

2.

Beneath a tagline that reads “Confessional Doctrine, Traditional Liturgy”

During the forty days of Lent, God’s baptized people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of Lent: repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

3.

After opening remarks about the writer’s training regimen for long distance running competitions—

February 22, 2012 marks the beginning of another season of “disciplined training.” That day is Ash Wednesday and it is the first day of the Lenten journey which will cover 40 days and end on Easter morning, April 8. It’s a time where we are to focus on strengthening our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving muscles.

+ + +

I don’t recall hearing about the classic Lenten disciplines when I was a Lutheran lad. My missionary parents didn’t talk about them. Nor did the LCMS-trained teachers at my elementary school. Nor did the Australian Lutheran pastors who shaped the piety of the high school I attended in Adelaide.

To be sure, we prayed. Every day, both at home and at school. We

remembered the poor, though never well enough, our instruction in giving being focused chiefly on chipping in some coins when the collection plate passed by. Fasting was a Catholic thing. If a Lutheran boy thought about it all, it was only for the sake of feeling smug that we, the better Christians, were at perfect liberty to chow down on the meat pies and sausage rolls that were standard fare in the high school tuck shop, also on Fridays. This is not to say that we Lutheran boys and girls were deprived of calls to mortify the flesh. Fact is, these came at us constantly, and not only during Lent. "What does such baptizing with water signify? Answer: ...that the Old Adam in us should...daily...be drowned and die, and...a new creature daily come forth and arise," etc. Or in Jesus' terms, "Let anyone who would come after me deny him/herself, take up his/her cross, and follow me." This was year-long fare. To this day I'm able to sing "When I survey the wondrous cross" by heart, all four stanzas of it. This can only be because it was a staple of high school chapel services regardless of the season. "My richest gain I count but loss." "Love so amazing, so divine / demands my soul, my life, my all." In other words, give it up for Jesus. Every day. In every way. No time off for good behavior, as Old Adam liked to grumble whenever he surfaced for another gulp of air.

So what was Lent for, back then? The kid's answer was "More church (sigh)." The adults who ran things would have spoken about the imperative of paying honor and heed to the person and the act at the heart of reality as Christians confess it to be. Whereas at other times of the year we attended to all manner of things that fall under the umbrella of "the Christian faith," in Lent we zeroed in on Christ and him crucified. As I feebly remember, that was the steady, year-after-year content of the special Wednesday Lenten services that were de rigueur in every Lutheran church I knew of. We studied the Passion. We heard of

Jesus' wounds. We got the perspective of the several players in the drama. We heard tell, over and over, of the love of God beyond all understanding, distilled to its most concentrated form in the Son of God bleeding out his life for the salvation of the world.

What I don't recollect is being told to do something. The other day I asked a Milwaukee-born friend of similar age and background—straight LCMS in his case—if he remembered this. No, he said. And then with a laugh, "I was a kid. Could be I just wasn't paying attention." So I called a retired colleague, a graduate of Hamma Seminary, and asked what Lent was like in his early years as a pastor of the former Lutheran Church in America. The account he gave made me wonder why our forebears in the LCA and LCMS disliked each other so. In Lent, at least, they did the same thing. They preached the Passion. They urged repentance. They did their level best to fasten eyes and hearts on Jesus. What accounts for this sameness? I'm guessing a shared and solid commitment to the original Wittenberg principle of Christian discipleship that Bob Kolb laid out for us so deftly three weeks ago. "If you [trust] in the Lord above all else that he [has] made, you [will] do what the logic of faith makes inevitable." Or as we Crossings types might spin it, "To fix behavior, attend to the heart. To cure the heart, preach Christ." Again I'm guessing that this or something very like it drove those Lutheran Lents of yesteryear, however well or poorly they played out. In any case, thus that dreaded dose, for kids, of extra church.

Then something changed. Or so it feels.

I'd love to see Bob Kolb or some of his academic admirers bring the same scrutiny to U.S. Lutheran habits and pieties of the past 50 years that Bob has been applying to the 18th-century pieties of German Lutherans. Instead of postils and prayerbooks,

they'd browse church bulletins and newsletters. They'd pore through the catalogues of CPH and Augsburg Fortress, at least for the years (were there any?) when Lutheran layfolk bothered to shop there instead of dashing down to the local Christian bookstore for the newest best-seller by the latest hot-spit Arminian evangelical. These days, of course, those layfolk do their dashing to amazon.com. How one might study that I haven't a clue. Nor can I guess how one would track the shifting, evolving content on current-century websites of congregations and districts, of synods and churchwide organizations. I'm ever so glad I'm not the historian who would need to figure such things out.

But I do hope somebody does. Among so much else, I'd like to understand a lot better than I do how we managed to arrive at today's not-so-Lutheran Lent, the one that makes the nose of a confessional thinker start twitching the way a dog's does when it smells a rat.

Fasting. Prayer. Almsgiving. Essential Christian habits, yes. About that there's no Lutheran argument. Melanchthon, writing in the Apology, cheerfully agrees with his Roman opponents that all three are commanded by God (Ap XII.139). Who with even a moderate grasp of all that's in the Bible would think to dispute that, at least where prayer and care for the poor are concerned? Fasting, to be sure, is a more complicated issue. In the synoptics Jesus gets taken to task because his disciples don't fast (Mk. 2:18ff, with parallels). The Gospel of John makes no mention at all of the practice. There are three references in Acts 13 and 14 to Christians fasting as they pray. After that the word vanishes from the New Testament, not a peep in Paul, nor even in James. If Melanchthon is willing nonetheless to assert its importance, that's because he thinks of fasting in a broad sense, not merely as a refusal of food but as anything and everything that Christians do by way of so saying no to their

consumptive inclinations. The “mortification” and “discipline” of the flesh, he calls it; and when he speaks of it as a “necessary kind of exercise” he points to Jesus’ injunction to “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation” (Lk. 21:34) and to Paul’s readiness to “pummel my body [soma, not sarx] and subdue it” (1 Cor. 9:27). What’s more, lest anyone in Wittenberg should think that giving sausages up for Lent will fill the bill here, he speaks of “true fasting” which “must be constant, because God constantly commands it”; and what God commands is “diligence” against “indulging the flesh and catering to its desires.” (For the above see Ap XII.139, XIV.45-47.)

Again the question for the historians: how did we get from fasting as diligence against indulging the flesh to fasting as self-love, “an excellent discipline to help us get more in touch with ourselves” (Exhibit 1 above)? That’s the tale I’d love to hear. Until it gets told by someone competent to tell, I’m obliged to shelve my own suspicions in the matter. That’s all they are, suspicions, by no means ready for prime time. To spit them out would be an indulgence of my own flesh and a sin against the eighth commandment, the one that in Luther’s account enjoins us to speak well of our neighbors and explain their actions in the kindest way. That would surely include whatever actions, large or small, have contributed in recent decades to the steady corruption of a proper Lutheran Lent.

And a corruption it is, this new Lutheran Lent with its shift of focus from the cross of Christ to the pushing of the disciplines. Doubtless that shift was well intended. Someone saw reasons for it, found them compelling, and got lots of other influential folks to sign on to the project. It would hardly be the first time that good intentions have gone awry. But gone awry they have. I underscore this for the sake of any other well-intentioned Lutheran neighbors who continue today to

support the shift. In a word, it doesn't work. By focusing attention on desired outcomes it disrupts the very process that produces good outcomes. It downgrades Christ. It yields rotten fruit, or at least it threatens to.

One sees the problem in all three of the opening exhibits that I plucked from those congregational websites. I've already held my nose at the first. To imagine that I need to critique it further would insult your Christian intelligence. Still, indulge me. One more shot at the fish-filled barrel: Q. "As you all work away at your 'spiritual practices,' who gets the love? Jesus?" A. "Jesus? Who's that?" (OK, I'm done. Here's the rifle. Pop away.)

Christ is also missing from Exhibits 2 and 3 unless you're willing in E2 to find him tucked deeply away in the reference to "God's baptized people." E2 adds "repentance" to the list of disciplines, preliminary to the other three. That would be a step in the right direction were we given a clue as to what the repenting was about. We're told that all four in combination are the means through which the baptized "cleanse their hearts." A proper preface for Lent (Lutheran Book of Worship) employs precisely that language. That hardly excuses it. Did someone miss the point of Ash Wednesday's psalm that heart-cleansing is a job only God can do (Ps. 51:7, 10)?

For its part, E3 speaks of "strengthening our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving muscles" but gives no reason for doing that. Why then "focus" on it? Again, Christ gets no mention, but then neither does God unless, in another excess of charity, we're willing to find him present by implication as the one we pray to. E3 also trots out another popular feature of the new Lent, by which we find ourselves on a "journey" that starts on Ash Wednesday and "ends on Easter morning." So much for the constancy of God's commands that Melancthon underscored. Come Easter afternoon we all get to loaf, and what? Wait till next

year to pray again or say another “no” to the raging old Adam? OK, I’m being unfair. But then if the behaviors touted for Lent are meant for everyday use, why lift them up as special to Lent? And why these behaviors in particular? Why not hard work? Devoted parenting? Consistent truth-telling? Why not manifestations of the “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” that people “guided by the Spirit” are free to exhibit in ways beyond counting (Gal. 5:22-23, 25)? Or why superficial fasting and not the deeper crucifying of the flesh that Paul speaks about in the same passage (Gal. 5:24)? Frankly, the latter sounds far more useful to the Christian person herself, and of much greater benefit to the people who have to live with her.

+ + +

Time now to get serious.

The real problem with today’s Lent is far graver than the superficial stuff I’ve sketched so far. It’s as if the greatest gift the Spirit gave the Church through the Wittenberg reformers has been shoved in a corner by their own careless children, and there it sits collecting dust. A few, one fears, have tossed it in the trash. So it strikes me, at any rate.

Here I sing to the choir: Luther and company grasped as few others have that life with God is a matter not of behavior but of trust. If you trust well, you’ll behave well. If you trust poorly the behavior that arises from that, however pretty it appears, will be a stink in the nostrils of God Almighty. Chances are, of course, that it will quickly spread unpleasantness in the neighborhood as well.

This, by the way, is the thrust of the Gospel we hear on Ash Wednesday. See the bits in Matthew 6 about the hypocrites who flaunt their almsgiving, praying, and fasting. (Parenthetically: I’ll bet Jesus mentions these activities and not others simply

because they're the three the hypocrites most like to flaunt. The point is not that followers of his should grant them preferential rank among all other possible behaviors.)

Now it happens that Matthew 6 is an all but perfect text to run through the Crossings sieve, that scheme devised by a couple of recent teachers, Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder, to help keep the Wittenberg gift dusted off and sparkling in the middle of the room where it belongs.

So here's how the passage looks in a Crossings 6-step outline: 1 (Surface behavioral problem): Folks are stinking up the joint as they flaunt their piety. 2 (Underlying trust problem): They love the oohs and aahs they get. They believe it amounts to something. 3 (Fundamental God problem): They've gotten their reward. No oohs and aahs from God for them. Quite the opposite. 4 (Fundamental Christ solution): Jesus sweetens the whole wide world through the hidden piety of dying for the hypocrites and earning God's Easter ooh and aah for their sake, and ours too. 5 (Underlying trust solution): We start believing that the ooh and aah bestowed by God on Jesus is the only one we'll ever need. 6 (Surface behavior solution): We don't flaunt our piety, we simply do it. We quietly honor our Father with conduct that sweetens the neighborhood. "Ooh and aah," say some of the neighbors as they think for once to thank God.

True fasting, true prayer, true care for the poor—true whatever, of the kind that deposits the glories of ooh and aah at the feet of the only One who deserves them: that's what Christ is aiming for ("Let your light so shine," etc., Matt. 5:16). And wouldn't you know, that's exactly what he gets out of us when we trust him. But first he has to kill that hankering within for oohs and aahs of our own, the suspicion being that we somehow need them. It's this ever-present hankering that makes it impossible to elicit what God is looking for from folks by telling them what

to do. You get it instead, counter-intuitively, by telling them over and over what Christ has done for them.

That's not, I think, what our new Lent is doing for the saints.

+ + +

Our old Lent did it, though.

Old Lent started with a real Ash Wednesday, not one that diddled around with talk of disciplines and Lenten journeys but focused squarely on dealing the death blow to the old creature's pretensions. Once a year we were forced to listen. "Dust you are. To dust you shall return." It will happen not by dint of accident or the mere nature of things, but because God says it must. He's the one who stands against you, implacably, insurmountably. Don't think you'll buy him off with your "good" behavior. Ain't gonna happen.

Yet wonder of wonders, this God-against-you is also the God who sends his Son to find you in the ash heap, to forgive your sins, to brand you with his cross, and to fill your newly created lungs with the breath, life, and power called Holy Spirit. Don't be afraid. Away you go not just to die—that you'll do—but also to live. You've got Christ's promise on this.

So that was Ash Wednesday. Then to reinforce its central point folks heard of Christ their whole Lent long. And from that process, repeated again and again, emerged the old Lutheran codgers that lots of us have known and treasured, and still do. They can be prickly, difficult, dense; here and there prideful; not always easy to get along with. But oh my goodness, how generous they can be. How devoted to prayer and daily devotion. How fiercely committed to starving the beast called "self," or trying to, at least. And in myriad other ways they bless the world God sends them into day after day.

Those codgers are the living proof, it seems to me, of the Wittenberg point. Preach Law to kill. Preach Gospel to resurrect. Preach Christ, Christ, Christ, and watch how good things start to flow from trusting hearts.

I think we ought to start a movement to retrieve the Lent that was. Our kids won't like it too much. Gone will be their chance to brag about giving up chocolates, and in its place will come the agony of still more church. So be it. It's never too soon to start mortifying the flesh with the genuine mortification that comes from the hand and mouth of God and lands us in the lap of Christ our Lord.

It's from that lap alone that tomorrow's saintly codgers will finally spring.

Jerome Burce
Lakewood, Ohio
March 29, 2012

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmann@charter.net.

You can support the ministry of the Crossings Community with a tax-deductable donation via PayPal (click icon below).