

Lenten Reverie. First Anniversary of Bob Bertram's Death.

Colleagues,

For this first full week in Lent, GO to the Crossings to www.crossings.org and click on "More Literature – Robert W. Bertram's." Then click on "Pardon My Dying – A Sequel to Ash Wednesday," a magnum opus from 1972. It's already been a year since Bob died, the second week in March 2003. This week's ThTh 299 and the next one, ThTh 300, d.v., will be some celebrative theology in Bob's memory. After reading Bob's "Sequel" – if you can take more – keep on reading below. It's my sermon from 1996 on the 50th anniversary of Bob's ordination.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Trinity Sunday 1996 – June 2, 1996.

Commemorating Bob Bertram's ordination to the holy ministry half a century ago. At Bob and Thelda's home congregation, Luther Memorial Church, Richmond Heights, MO 63117

The Texts for Trinity Sunday

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

2 Cor. 13:11-14

Matthew 28:16-20

Today's sermon calls for a Crossing, crossing Bob Bertram with the texts for Trinity Sunday: R-W-B and his ministry with the divinity of the Trinity.

Now, he'd be the first to say: "Eddy, au contraire, crossing the congregation is the assignment for today, and since I'm here I'll get crossed too—if such Crossing really happens!"

Ay, there's the rub. The rub that Bob has been rubbing for lo, these many years. That crossing really happens. That the Word of God, God's diagnosis and God's healing, really rubs off onto and into people. That law and Gospel genuinely intersect our lives, cross us (as Big Bend Blvd. crosses Clayton Rd.) and make us different as we come out of the intersection. Bob's been doing that to us over the years. That's one reason why we're here this a.m.

I first intersected Bob 48 years ago. That's half of 96, half the span of this century so far. It was 1948. It was the first course in philosophy that Bob taught at Valparaiso University. Its title was: Recent Religious Philosophies. But, of course, that title was a disguise for Crossings—although I didn't recognize it at that time. Maybe you, Bob, didn't either.

Freshly graduated from "the sem" just 50 yrs. ago these very days, he and Thelda got married (June 12) and moved to the U. of Chicago for graduate work. There President O. P. Kretzmann, the mad genius of V.U., discovered him along with other whiz kids (as we called them in those days) and enticed them for a pittance to teach at Valpo while they finished off their graduate studies. In Bob's case, it was the scenic route. So 17 yrs later the Ph.D. was finally done.

Why I'm the preacher for this solemn and auspicious occasion is

apparently that on Bob's scenic route of ministry he's crossed mine over and over again. As I said, my intersection with Bob started 48 years ago. At first major mentor for my V.U. philosophy major, he then was Theology department chair when I came back to V.U. to teach later on. Also chair of the syst. dept. when Marie & I came to St. L. and I started teaching at "the sem." That made me a co-conspirator with him as "the sem" got drawn into the battle of Missouri. Then colleague for that dear decade at Seminex (where toward the end the two of us were about the only ones left in the department of syst. theol.). And now for more than a decade collaborator in Crossings.

The best way to honor teachers is to learn from them. Many of us here, Bob, honor you in just that way—we have learned from you. To put it succinctly I'll borrow Melancthon's words about Luther: "He taught me the Gospel." You, Bob, taught us the Good News about Jesus.

To get back to the only real assignment for any sermon I'd better get back to the day's texts, the readings for Trinity Sunday, and let them cross us. But I'll seek to do so with your help, Bob. How so? By saying once more what you once taught us.

First of all, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a complicated riddle for us to figure out, or even to believe when we can't figure it out. Instead, the doctrine of the Trinity is Gospel, Good News about God. Both Good and New. New for sure, in that no other people except Christians talk about God this way. And Good, very Good News about God. That the One who created us also rescues us; that the one who judges us also makes a sweet swap in Jesus to heal us; that the power of God now loose in the world is the Healing Spirit. Trinitarian God-talk is Good News talk about God, because it was first of all Good News talk from God—from God to us.

I'll pick out 4 words from today's three texts for this Trinitarian crossings. For each of these you've been our teacher.

THE GENESIS TEXT.

Key word: IMAGE.

"Let us make the human in our image." So we are created in the Image of God.

What's that? Bob may not have been the first to come up with this picture of that IMAGE, but he has taught it to us like this. We humans image God as mirrors, reflectors. Bob's quip about Adam's first words when he awoke from his rib surgery and first saw Eve: "You remind me of someone I know!" Images of God are God-reflectors.

What bounces back and forth between God-reflectors is is not light-waves, but conversation.

And it happens between us humans because the mirror that we are is first of all for conversation with the creator. God speaks, and we are able to hear the divine address. We were created that way, for that very purpose. God's speaking to us elicits a response. When WE talk, then God listens. God responds to our response and calls us then to listen to THAT message. Humans are able to hear and able to respond to God. Hear-able and response-able. But it is not merely information exchange, as the next chapters of Genesis reveal.

Although we (Adams and Eves of the world) are response-able, our responses to God the Creator-Giver are routinely the wrong responses, ir-responsible. Whereupon God doesn't back off, but pursues that irresponsible response and asks for an accounting from us for that. God's response comes with a "Why?" as the first word. Why did you do/say this? Why, Adam and Eve, are you

hiding in the bushes? And thus the pressure is on to give an account of ourselves, to justify ourselves before God.

Genesis 3 provides the primordial pattern. It's an X-ray diagnosis in three layers.

Step-1 *Making the wrong response. Irresponsible behavior. Even more so, irresponsible when God calls them (us) to account. Passing the buck, the blame, to anybody else, in frantic attempt to justify ourselves. Finally passing the buck back to God himself. "The woman YOU gave me... The serpent YOU created..."*

Step-2 *Underlying that is Unfaith already operating. Having trusted the address of the Other Voice in the Garden, there is no more trust in the Voice of the Creator. No fear, love, trust, vis-a-vis God as conversation partner. Just sheer terror and the compulsion to hide for shame.*

Step-3 *God still responds even to this. Although the execution is postponed, the verdict isn't. The wages of sin is death. The first step on the way to that death is expulsion from the garden.*

There is Good News in Genesis, even for fractured images. But it's not to be found in the image we are, the God-connectedness we start out with. Good news for fractured images comes from another Image, the one speaking in Matthew's Gospel.

THE MATTHEW TEXT.

Key word: EXOUSIA (authority)

Step-4. *The Good News term in the closing verses of Matt. 28 is authority (exousia). You've been the church's teacher on that one too, Bob, especially from Matthew. Relocating Authority has been part of our rhetoric ever since you imparted it to many of us—from Semtex days onward.*

Jesus claims to have “all exousia.” And what is that? There is authority, and there is authority. In Matthew you helped us see the difference. Jesus’s authority is not “Gentile” authority, where one commands, the others obey, or else. No, the authority that Jesus claims here at the end of Matthew is an authority he worked hard to get. It’s the upside-down authority of not being served, but serving, of giving his life a ransom for many. This authority is compelling only by virtue of its own winsome attractiveness, its being Good and New—and being offered to, not coerced upon, us.

You, Bob, have pressed this upon us as Paul does in Philippians 2 where he probes that strange way that Jesus was equal to God. Not by claiming his divine perks, but by swapping his fullness (these perks) with the empties. Emptying himself into the form and image of us who are empty of God’s glory—empty as in death, even the really empty death on a cross, so that we might be filled with the God-glory that is natively his own. What a sweet swap, to coin a phrase.

And what does Jesus get for all his efforts? He gets us. Which he apparently sees as a good deal. So much so, that he proudly takes us along with him when he heads back home announcing to his Abba, “look what I picked up down there on earth and have now brought home!” That is Good and that is New. That makes the Swap really Sweet.

THE CORINTHIANS TEXT.

Key word: KOINONIA

Step – 5 After the sweet swap of Christ’s Good Friday and Easter, Bob, you’ve taught us to go straight to faith. And you’ve always kept up the drumbeat, Bob, that as Good and New as the Sweet Swap is, it’s only our own when we trust it. *Fides is sola*. Because that is the only way that promises work. When

they get trusted, they become operational.

And what gives faith such power to render sinners righteous? It's not the moxie or the chutzpah of the one doing the believing. It's the clout of the One being trusted. Faith effects the transfer whereby Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness. We know you pilfered that from Luther—and he stole it from Paul and John and Isaiah and finally Jesus himself—viz., "Glaubstu, hastu; glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht." [When you believe it, you have it; when you don't believe, you don't have it.]

Which leads us to word Number 3, in the II Corinthians text: koinonia. The translation "fellowship" of the Holy Spirit is a deflated rendering for what the Holy Spirit is up to. It's koinonia with the genitive (in Greek). And that means imparting, partnering, having a part in, partnership, being a share-holder—of what was once Christ's property now becoming ours as well. Not just togetherness, but having a share of something you didn't have before. And that by Faith alone.

THE CORINTHIANS TEXT.

Key Word: MIND, SAME MIND

Step-6 *Here's the last link in the diagnosis/prognosis. The key term is MIND, SAME MIND, in Paul's final encouragement and benediction in II Corinthians.*

You, Bob, have let us see that Paul is not pushing for horizontal harmony in a conflicted congregation with this bon mot that he uses frequently. No, the harmony he's plugging for is a spin-off of the koinonia partnering that the Spirit works when linking us to Christ. He's calling for our heads to be in harmony with the mind of Christ. That's the one and same mind that Paul always promotes. It's the new mentality, the new mindset, for managing our lives the very same way that Christ

manages us. Remember, not lording it over us; but lording it under us, serving, not hankering to be served—and giving his life...

Your counsel has been for us to “mind the store with the mind of Christ.” It’s the churchly store, of course, and you’ve not given up the drumbeat for that, in ELCA, in Seminex, here at Luther Memorial. But also minding the store of our own personal lives. And also minding that part of the world that God assigns to us as our “store” and says: “Here, take care of this for me.”

Trinitarian theology is Good News. It’s what the brothers and sisters in the early church worked out in language to confess what God has done “for us and for our salvation.” It X-rays what our IMAGE problem really is with God. It sets the foundation for Jesus’ AUTHORITY to be our brother and at the same time “My Lord and my God.” It pinpoints where the Power comes for us to PARTICIPATE in God’s own Life, as God’s Healing Spirit “takes what is Christ’s, and makes it our own.” The MIND OF CHRIST which finally changes our mind is the “same mind” whereby the deity operates. It is indeed, we say in the Lord’s Prayer, the will of God that how things are done in heaven is how they are to be done on earth. Same mindset—for us and for our salvation.

The language of the doctrine of the Trinity, Elert once said, is finally doxological language. To be sung, not dissected. It’s where our faith finishes, not where it begins. Faith always begins with Christ, the way (to God) the truth (about God) and the life (of God). If God really was in Christ reconciling the world, then Trinity is the God-language that fits, and doxology is our finale.

All of the above, Bob, you’ve helped us to learn, better still,

to believe. So don't take it amiss when we include you now in the Trinitarian doxology with which this homily concludes.

Let the congregation sing. The melody is Old Hundredth.

Praise all through whom God's blessings flow—

Name one? Bob Bertram here below.

His "sweet-swap" Jesus sets us free

To love, trust, praise the Trinity.

And now the "real" doxology:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise him all creatures here below.

Praise him above, ye heavenly host.

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen