

# Life on the FasTrak. But Not the One You May Think of First.

Colleagues,

[Before we get to serious business, take a look at what Crossings webmaster Tom Law just put on our website: <https://crossings.org/logs/default.shtml> Did you notice? 2452 visitors came to the website EVERY DAY in September. That's one visitor every 35.24 seconds around the clock day and night. On second thought, that IS serious business.]

Now to the serious business of Life on the FasTrak. Some background:

1. Everett R. Kalin's homily is today's theology for Thursday. Seminary classmate of mine (1950-55), then Seminex faculty colleague for a decade, Ev's last paying position before retirement (he turned 80 just a few days ago) was at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. He is now "Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of NT Emeritus" at that place. He taught NT at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) starting in 1966 and at Seminex starting in 1974. When the Seminex faculty was deployed to three other Lutheran seminaries in 1983, he and three other Seminex professors (George Hoyer, Carl Graesser and Robert Smith) came to PLTS. [George is my brother-in-law. His 90th b.d. is in just a few days. Some of you might like to know.]
2. PLTS was founded on September 21, 1952, St. Matthew's Day. Every year when St. Matthew's day rolls around they

celebrate Founders' Day on the Wednesday of that week. Since this year was Seminex's own 35th birthday, they planned and pulled off an integrated day. And, of course, there was worship. Ev did the proclaiming.

3. But one more introductory item is needed. Ev's two major metaphors for the sermon are piece-of-cake for every San Francisco Bay Area dweller, but not to folks elsewhere in the world—even folks like me east of the Sierras. He glombs on to terms from rush-hour-traffic on the expressways around the Bay: "FasTrak." and "VALID ETC." Completely arcane to me they were, so I asked Ev for some exegesis.

"FasTrak is the name for the automatic toll paying system out here, with a gizmo on our windshields, by means of which we don't need to stop to pay the \$4.00 for the bridges (Golden Gate \$5.00). As you go through the tollbooth, on your left is an electronic sign, which flashes the wording VALID ETC. Ever since I saw it, I have been pondering what it might mean, and, more importantly, what I might make of it in a sermon or devotion.

"Now what does VALID ETC mean? VALID means that the gizmo on your windshield (and the super computer somewhere) says you are kosher for GO. But what about the ETC? Isn't that interesting,—at least to a quirky homilitizer who hunts for such things. When I used ETC for this sermon I wanted it to mean (and thought it did mean) et cetera. After preaching the sermon I Googled the phrase and found that it really means Valid Electronic Toll Collection. Not much preaching value there. So in the sermon it means what I say it means."

With that data now in your own gizmo, you are VALID ETC for GO on Ev's FasTrak sermon.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **PLTS, Founders' Day and Seminex Celebration, September, 2009.**

Lessons for Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist: Ezek 2:8-3:11, Eph 2:4-10, Psalm 119:33-40, Matt 9:9-13

Matt 9:9-13 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. 10And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

"VALID, ETC."

So many topics; so many texts; so little time. I was tempted to add, "and miles to go before I sleep," but decided it was not a good idea to begin a sermon with the word "sleep"! So many topics: PLTS Founders' Day; Seminex at 35; the call of Matthew; and one more, which I'll save until the end. So many texts, from Ezekiel, Ephesians, Psalm 119 and Matthew. These I narrow to two, Matthew and Ephesians. The Psalm we sang, and Psalms are for singing. All I'll do with Ezekiel is make the rather perverse observation that in God's call to swallow the scroll we finally see the origin of the Collect for Holy Scripture, which invites us to read, mark, learn and INWARDLY DIGEST.

For all these topics, from these two texts, one double theme: a) God's grace/mercy/love that embraces us in Jesus Christ, the

crucified one, and b) the grace/mercy/love we are therefore freed to live out in the world with this crucified one.

But still the embarrassment of riches. Today's texts from Matthew and Ephesians use all the terms I just used, grace/mercy/love, and more, to speak of both halves of the double theme, God's love for us and God's life through us. I want to make it simple, as Rabbi Marc Gellman was quoted as doing in an article called "The Right Way to Pray?" in last Wednesday's NY Times (printed, the article was 11 pages long). The Rabbi said, ". . . when you come right down to it, there are only four basic prayers. Gimme! Thanks! Oops! and Wow!"

I need, and have found, such a simple phrase that covers both God's love to us and God's love through us. I found it neither in Matthew nor in Ephesians but in the words you see as you go through a tollbooth using FasTrak. A sign flashes these words: "VALID ETC." VALID ETC.?! Whatever the FasTrak people meant that to mean, in this sermon it means: a) because of God's love in the crucified one we are VALID, validated, justified, every day anew and b) every day anew the Spirit impels us to live the ETC. to which the gospel calls us.

Now the call of Matthew. Whatever this tax gatherer had done or been, with no prerequisites, he was called: FOLLOW ME. This was not, in first instance, a call to be one of the twelve apostles, but a call like ours, to be Jesus' follower, to follow his way to the cross, by which Matthew and we are validated. Matthew's gospel is by no means devoid of this VALID-half of our double equation: it tells us that Christ has come to give his life a ransom for many and that his blood is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. But Matthew majors in the ETC. In today's gospel, when Jesus is challenged about his and God's barrier-breaking inclusiveness, Jesus says, "Go and learn what it means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" Jesus' followers are to be

just as welcoming, as barrier-crossing, as merciful as he. "Go . . . and make disciples of all nations" is the command with which this gospel ends.

Ephesians 2 is much more articulate about the VALID part than Matthew: God is rich in mercy, acts out of great love, by grace, through faith, not the result of works. But the ETC. is not far behind-the "not of works" verse is followed by the assertion that in Christ Jesus we were created for good works. And if today's Ephesians lesson had not been cut at v. 10, we would have come to one of the most barrier-breaking, reconciling passages in the whole bible, in which through the cross, through his flesh, Jesus has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile "that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (v. 15).

Sadly, as James Carroll shows in CONSTANTINE'S SWORD, the church often made the cross a weapon of warfare, of superiority. Whatever was not the church became no thing, especially if it was Jewish. The church, with its sword-cross, became the ecclesiastical equivalent of Chevy Chase's self-introduction on Saturday Night Live: "Hi, I'm Chevy Chase . . . and you're not!" Thank God for the cross that unites rather than divides, creating one new humanity!

Now the PLTS story. PLTS had two main catalysts, the Holy Spirit and James Prince Beasom. Beasom, President of the California Synod of the ULCA, was an incredibly energetic, mission-oriented pastor. Before there was a PLTS, Beasom went each year to the Lutheran seminaries in the East to recruit promising pastors for the West. He was so successful they said, "Don't come back." And so, he and others bought two mansions on a hill, and voila, a seminary in and for the West.

PLTS has had a wonderful blending of the VALID and the ETC.,

with an evangelical center and a reach beyond itself. Of PLTS's four orienting perspectives, Lutheran Identity seems to focus most specifically on the VALID, the evangelical core: it reads, "'A shared passion for the biblical story, centered on God's sheer love in Jesus Christ, which forms us as a community of worship, study and service, rooted in the Lutheran confessional tradition."

The other three perspectives, Religious Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Public Sphere, flow from this evangelical core into various aspects of the ETC. In today's gospel Jesus speaks of God's desire for mercy in the context of warning against saying no to those to whom God says yes. And so PLTS became a Reconciling in Christ seminary.

Its ecumenical and inter-religious setting in the GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION [GTU] is a logical extension of its Lutheran heritage, not a denial of it. So is PLTS's commitment to justice and peace. Maybe in the 60s it was accused of being the Berkeley city council at prayer. To which two brief remarks: 1. I learned in the Beasom booklet that the seminary is not actually in Berkeley, the property line putting it almost entirely in Contra Costa County. So, seminarians, if necessary, a quick note home to the family in Peoria or St. Cloud: "Guess what, Grandma, I am ACTUALLY NOT going to school in Berkeley!" 2. A passion for peace and justice did not first spring up at Sproul Plaza or on Telegraph Ave. It is at the heart of Jesus' message, and he, in turn, found it in the books he called scripture.

The Seminex story. In January of 1974, the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis suspended the seminary's president, John Tietjen, alleging that he was harboring false teachers on the faculty. The students declared a moratorium on classes until the issue was resolved, and the faculty majority (all but five of the 40-plus professors) honored the moratorium.

A month later, with nothing resolved, the faculty was ordered to teach or be fired. The students and the faculty majority then voted to continue seminary education as Concordia Seminary in Exile (later called Christ Seminary-Seminex). On February 19, 1974 we processed off the campus to be met by Walter Brueggemann, then dean of Eden Seminary, and representatives of Jesuit-run St. Louis University, who gave us classrooms and took us in. In 1983, in anticipation of Lutheran merger, Seminex deployed its remaining faculty to other Lutheran seminaries, and four of us came here (Carl Graesser, Bob Smith, George Hoyer and I).

Here are the Seminex issues, in an abridged Gimme! Thanks! Oops! and Wow! version. On the issue of the VALID, both sides wanted to uphold the gospel. Our accusers sought to do that by insisting on a particular understanding of the scriptures. They insisted we affirm, for example, "the historicity of every detail in the life of Jesus as recorded by the evangelists." We found the gospel as the center of the scriptures by methods that differed from, and were not helped by, the ones they insisted on. On the issue of the ETC., here is one example. Our detractors declared, "a decision on . . . ordaining women . . . [cannot be] made on the basis of the 'Gospel' rather than on the teaching of Scripture as such." On the ordination of women we found the gospel a wonderful guide to keep us from saying no where God was saying yes.

These are the stories of Matthew's call, PLTS, and Seminex. There is one more story-by far the briefest of all, but, if John Steinbeck is right, the most important of all. In EAST OF EDEN he said, "If the story is not about the hearer, he/[she] will not listen." This VALID and ETC. stuff is our story, yours and mine.

Last week my wife, Clara, and I rushed to the home of a neighbor

to help the infirm husband, who had fallen. An hour later he fell again and 911 was called. As I sat with the wife, herself infirm, we spoke of their adult daughter, who lived at home with them and sacrificed her own life to meet their every need and then some. The mother said of the daughter, "She does not think she has done nearly enough and thus believes that when she dies she will not go to heaven, at least not right away."

Thanks be to God there is a different way to think about deeds of love and God's eternal embrace. The VALID, ETC. story is our story. From the baptismal get-go, because of Jesus Christ, we are VALID, validated in the sight of God. To these waters, this VALID, we are called back every day, only to be sent out on the FasTrak of the ETC., to show filial, parental, neighborly and every other kind of love. It does not get any better than that, and so, all I need to end is one of Rabbi Gellman's prayers: Wow! Amen.

Ev Kalin