

“Lord, Bless This Mess, Please!” A Sermon at the Daystar Conference

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh #291 concluded with something like this: I've been invited to the Daystar conference next week here in town. They want to remember and rehab the 1965 "Mission Affirmations" for implementation in the LCMS [Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod] today. If I hear something that grabs me, and if I can get permission, I'll pass it on to you. The presentations were a mixed bag. But that's no surprise really, since Daystar is a coalition. It is literally an INTER-NET-work, a conversation group in cyber-space. Now and then they meet in face-to-face conversation as they did Sunday, Monday, Tuesday this week. They are a group of unhappy campers in the LCMS. But not all are unhappy about the same things. Yet there was agreement that all the agents of unhappiness within the synod were also disastrous for missions. [For details on Daystar, GO to their web site: <day-star.net>]

Creme-de-la-creme at the gathering, I thought, was Steve Krueger's sermon at the eucharist. I have his permisison to pass it on to you. Steve pastors an LCMS congregation in San Diego, California. If you wish to respond, here's his e-address: <skreegs@earthlink.net>

The mess he addresses is the one in the LCMS. But other denominations are also afflicted with this malady. You can probably name one or two on your own.

Peace & Joy!

“Lord, Bless This Mess, Please!”
Reflections on the Baptism of Our Lord at the
DayStar Conference
The Eucharist
January 12, 2004

1. *What a mess! Tonight we DayStars are gathered as the community of faith around Word and Sacrament because we as a church are in a mess and we come from a synod that does not do well with mess (maybe that's part of our pathology...maybe that's part of the “purity cult's” problem: it can't deal with mess). We have a history of not liking messes. And that's too bad. Because the world into which we say we are in mission in Christ's name is a messy place, as a sinner's world usually is.*

Yet tonight we gather as people of hope, anyway, recognizing that we are in a mess as a church. Recognizing that, maybe, that is the real mess. The real mess we're in is that we don't do well with mess. And maybe we need to ask, “Why?”

But we can be people of hope, anyway, because we have a Lord who does. Who handles messes just fine. To Him tonight we cry out, “Lord, bless this mess, please!” Trusting that He does. That is why He came: to bless this mess of the whole human predicament, even ours.

2. *In our churches this past Sunday, we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord. To hear rightly the proclamation of*

the gospel of that day is to hear about how the Lord blesses messes. He takes them on as His own. Matthew's Gospel picks it up most clearly (although we are in the year of St. Luke). When Jesus, whose incarnation into our condemned flesh and its mortality we just celebrated at Christmas...when Jesus begins His earthly ministry, He begins it by taking on a sinner's baptism as His own. John's baptism was a baptism for sinners, for dealing with the messy, sordid business of their sins, with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of those sins. And in Matthew especially, John is aghast at the irony! John, we are told, tries to prevent Jesus from immersing Himself in such a baptism. 'It ought to apply to me, Jesus, to us...but not to you!' "I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?" John says (Matthew 3: 14). "Do it!" Jesus says, "to fulfill all righteousness" (3: 15). As if, therein is—if it doesn't beat all—the righteousness of God! In God's willing. Christic, solidarity with sinners and the messy, sordid business of their sins. Where God, in this wondrous Trinitarian moment at the baptism of Jesus, where the whole Trinity gets in on the action you will recall, and finds God's chief delight in taking on the mess of a whole, broken, sinful and fallen world as God's own, and suffering that mess up in God's self through God's Son, so that sinners could be free of the curse of it, the weight of it, the mortality of it, and live in freedom for their God again.

"Do it! Baptize me!" Jesus orders his cousin, John the Baptizer, "give me a sinner's baptism to fulfill all righteousness." The righteousness of God now consists in God's hanging out with sinners! And being crucified for them. God's righteousness now in Christ is found in taking on the world's accursed mess as God's own and

offering new life in exchange.

And thus, in Christ, in His new way of being righteous, is our hope. Our new life. The reason to be Christ's mission to a world full of mess in the name of a Savior.

Ernst Kaesemann, the great New Testament scholar, taking his cue from one Martin Luther, in his commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, plays with Paul's monumental phrase "the righteousness of God," which is now revealed through faith in Christ. And what is revealed, according to Kaesemann, is this radical thing. In Kaesemann's words: "God's grasping of his world" through grace (p. 93). As if righteousness does not consist in purity! God's righteousness consists in Christ's willing solidarity with sinners through which they are redeemed, through whom their lives are justified, and in whom sinners are offered a brand new chance at life with God! It is in blessing messes that God is righteous in Christ, claiming the rights to those messes as God's own, including messes like you and me.

At the baptism of Our Lord, as Jesus commands his cousin John to immerse Him in a sinner's baptism, "to fulfill all righteousness," the whole Trinity gets in on the act. The Spirit descends as a dove and a Proud Poppa in heaven speaks His Word, "That's my boy! That's my child! Of whom I am proud as punch!"

God's major kick, His "proper work" as Luther called it, is identifying redemptively with messy sinners and their lives. The purists won't like it. They've got some wrong-headed notion of righteousness that excludes sinners and the mess of their sins...but they just don't get the righteousness of God in Christ. God loves hanging out

with sinners and redeeming them and their lives. Just read the Gospels and get it straight!

3. Yet, therein is our real mess, isn't it? The crux of it. We don't have it straight. And what we in the Missouri Synod don't have straight is not just a God-pleasing view of scouting or the hundreds of other ditties that supposedly divide us, but the main thing! This gospel! This dispute is finally about the gospel. It is about Jesus. It is about how big our Jesus is and how deeply we let Him and His mission go into a messy world. It is about breaking through the impediment against Jesus by even his cousin John of not letting Christ get on the hook of the law and its curse upon sinners and their messes, and not keeping our Jesus nice and sanitized and clean and pure, far from the mess of life. Our dispute is about our doctrine of Christ and Christ's gospel and its central place in the life of the church! But as Luther wrote about over and over again—read his latter commentary on Galatians (volume 26 of Luther's Works), there's even a good paper on it on the DayStar Web Site, I wrote it—if you do not have a gospel that lets Christ on the hook, if you do not trust Him to get Himself involved with the messy business of sinners and their sins, if you do not let Him be righteous like He wants to be righteous, and have the rights to you, He can't do you any good! All His benefits are lost on you! All His freedom from the curse of the law eludes you.

Bob Bertram called that the "Pharisee heresy" and our synod is full of it. The legalism of the Pharisee heresy is infecting us all . . . even us on DayStar. We, too, cannot write by-law revisions and finesse political strategies fast enough, as if appealing to the law would save us and defeat our mess. Friends, let me tell you,

there is only death there. When you hang your heart on the law, it just gets worse and worse.

Our appeal must be to Christ and Christ alone, whose righteousness alone covers messes, even ours. Only a Jesus who takes what our mess deserves as His very own to a cross can help us. Only a crucified God for a world full of mess can do us any good. The mess is so grave, so weighty and so mortal that only He can bear it and defeat its power over us. But that is what Christ does so willingly, so lovingly, so faithfully, as if dying for sinners were His chief delight. It is His righteousness, offered freely to us all.

- 4. Faith sees that. Faith sees what our reason cannot: the blessed truth of the true gospel. Faith sees that in that Child of the manger God has entered in His grace and truth our mortal, condemned flesh for us all. Faith sees that in His baptism a Savior entered deep into a world-full of mess under divine condemnation. Faith sees the hope for outcasts and sinners when He makes it His business to seek them out and eat with them. Faith sees in a cross God bearing up in redemptive love the mess of a whole broken and hurting and sinful world. Didn't you see Him hanging on a cross over Yankee Stadium [after 9-11]? Just on whose back do you think that whole horror is placed? Thank God someone was there as His witness to name Him, who hears all the prayers and groans and sighs of all His children who cry out to Him and who answers all our prayers in that Son of His stretched out for the world as He is on that cross. Thank God Dave Benke was there to say, "You want to know where God is in this unspeakable horror and mess? Look! There He is! There's where to find your Tower of Strength! In Him and Him crucified." Faith can see that and necessitates our*

showing up on such occasions in a messy world. It's what the Mission Affirmations are all about. If Christ can be there, we'd better show up, too! Faith sees the true gospel – the one about Christ's divine solidarity with sinners and the mess of their sins – and believes that gospel and runs with it with joy. That's why we are here this evening and gathered for this conference. We've got a Christ big enough to follow as His Church into a messy world. The church is Christ's mission to the world, because it can be! When you've got a Christology big enough to handle mess, you can go anywhere with the message of hope in Jesus Christ, the Friend of sinners and the outcastness of the mess of their sins.

5. It seems to me that in our DayStar witness to the church we need to be saying that. We need to be appealing to Christ again. We need to be appealing to Christ's gospel again. There's all the case we need! There's all the authorization we need to be Christ's people in mission to a messy world...and a messed up church. We've got a Christ who's good with messes! And the purists, our opponents, who seem to be around in every generation? Let's diagnose their dilemma in the light of the Reformation gospel. They're afraid to trust a Jesus who blesses messes and dives right into them to save. That's why they can't handle mess. Their Christ is all locked up somewhere in some kind of purist's formula and is far too small. And because that is so, they've hung their heart where there's only death: on the law. And may God have mercy on their souls and someday, in His grace and mercy, set them free from their prison. That they have to hi-jack a whole church from the gospel and its mission they do at their eternal peril. But our prayer can be for them, too, as we pray, "Lord, bless this mess, please." He died even for messes like them.

But we dare never let them and their unbelief in the true gospel stop us. For the church is Christ's mission to the world. It doesn't belong to them. Nor, for that matter, to us. "Our beloved synod" was never ours to begin with. It always belonged to Him, to be a blessing to messes, in His precious name. Remembering whose church the church is and what it's for is what "The Mission Affirmations" try to be all about.

In these days ahead as we get pounded on and smeared and ridiculed and condemned, accused of messing things up as we DayStars are accused of every day, we know where to go to find again our strength, our courage and our hope.

It's called Baptism. The theme of this week of the Baptism of Our Lord. Martin Luther knew it so well. When he would be wracked by his doubts and there were many; by the devil's accusing taunts; by the weight of a movement that Luther had set in motion but that he could hardly control, that's where Luther would go. He would remember his Baptism. "Baptizatus sum," he would say [in Latin]. "But still, in it all, how do I know I belong to Christ?" Baptizatus sum. "I'm baptized." That's how I know whose I am.

There God the Father called us by our name. And the heavens opened up, and the Spirit as a dove descended. And faith was born through water and the Word. And a voice from a proud heavenly Poppa, busting with pride at what His own Child did for humble sinners such as you and I, said, "That's my boy! That's my girl! That's my child forever!"

We've hard days ahead, we DayStars, to confess Christ and Him alone. No question, we'll be doing a lot of that in

the context of mess. What a mess we are in! Good thing ours is a Christ whose specialty is blessing messes. And because that is so, there's hope, springing eternal, even for us.

Baptizatus sum!

In the precious Name of Jesus. Lord, bless this mess, please! Amen.

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