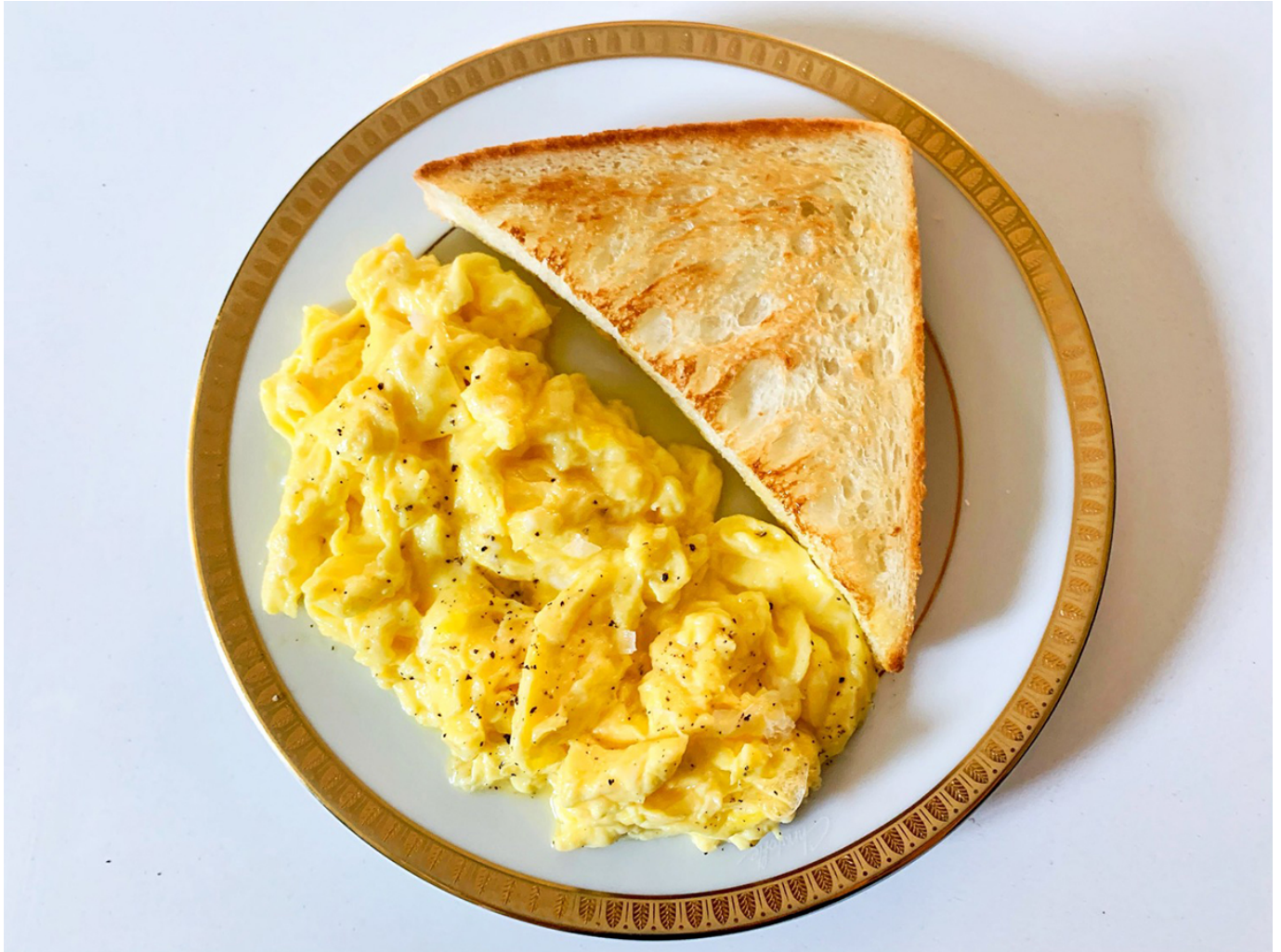


Lust, Trust, and Scrambled Eggs



Co-missioners,

Our editor reflects this week on a pressing issue of our day. Seriously! Don't let the opening paragraphs fool you.

We're delighted again to remind you of the next Crossings gathering, in-person as well as virtual. It's at the end of January in Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis. [Check our website for details](#). Online registration starts

soon (though not quite yet). God grant that you can make it!

The Crossings Community

Lust, Trust, and Scrambled Eggs

by Jerome Burce

The browser I use to get on the internet purports to be friendly. It fills its opening screen with links to articles it “thinks” I’ll want to read. A “smart” browser, as I suppose one calls it. There’s no question at all that it suggests astutely. I often click on the links it pops up.

One that hooked me some days ago was entitled “There’s Only One Right Way to Cook Scrambled Eggs.” Of course I clicked. How could I not? I’m a sinner. I’m also a practical theologian. The title grabbed me on both counts. It posed a question about righteousness, the issue of issues for sinners and theologians alike.

Can there be the least scrap of doubt as to what I discovered? I scramble eggs unrighteously, as in the way my mother taught me. I use the wrong eggs, the wrong butter, of the kind you buy in the standard grocery store. I add milk, a bit of salt. I use a whisk. I turn the heat too high. I don’t “coax the eggs to doneness.” I don’t stir “until the eggs pillow.” And when I’m finished the eggs don’t glisten as “they should.” All these are

deviations from the path that leads to eggs you can “marvel” over.

Or so says a priest of righteous egg-scrambling, self-anointed as it sounds, one Paul Kita of *Men’s Health* magazine who is nothing if not certain about how to scramble rightly. As for me and my house, we will continue to wallow in our insufficiency and settle for prosaic eggs after the fashion of the culinary underclass that refuses to be taught. Careless creatures we are. Doubtless lazy and wicked too. So also when it comes to “The Low-Calorie Noodle Your Life Needs,” prescribed by Mr. Kita and a co-author in another article I stumbled across. Stubborn fool that I am, I will give this a miss and continue to perish.

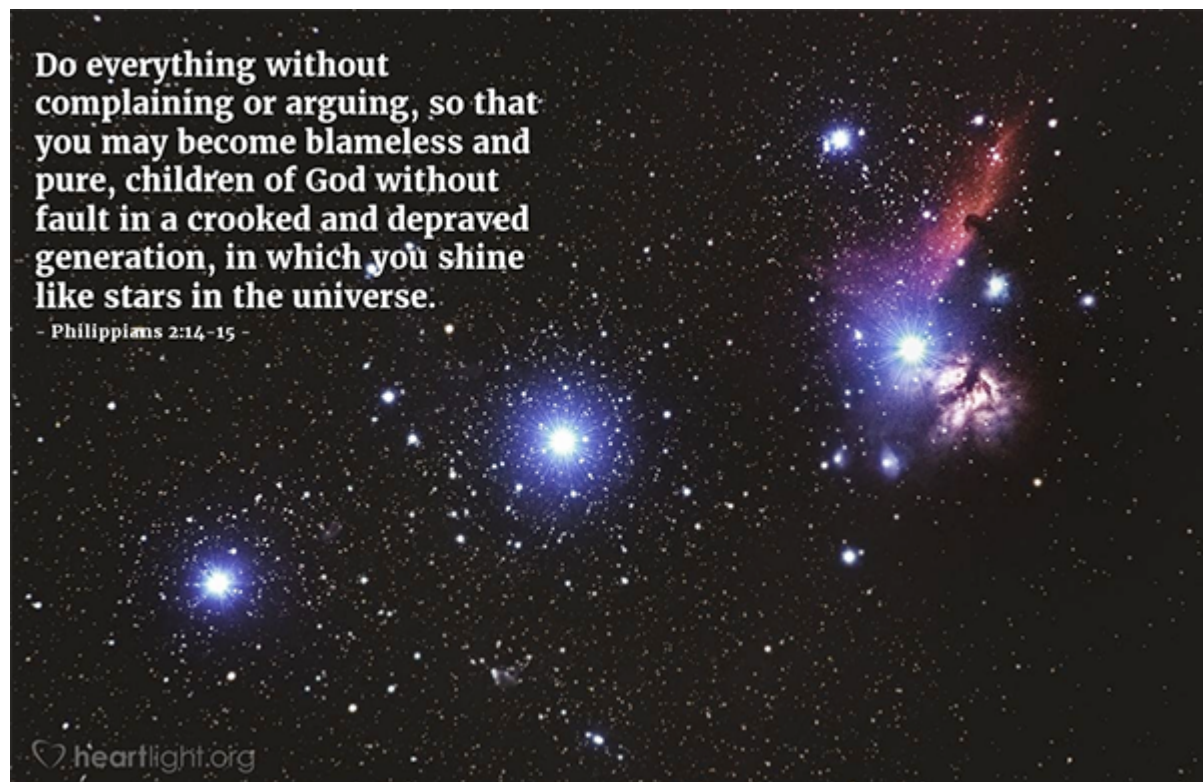
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The silliness above is even so illuminating. It reminds us of several things.

The issues of sin and the guilty conscience are with us still. Inexorably. Universally. They are not, as many would assert, the vile jokes of an unenlightened yesteryear that believed in a fictive god and gave too much credence to a silly Bible. Neither sin nor the guilty conscience can be shrugged aside so lightly. There’s not a person alive who isn’t stung every day by reminders that they’re less than they could be, might be, should be, ought to be. If one’s disregard for the Bible precludes getting those reminders from the likes of Jeremiah or Jesus, then in rush legions upon legions of others to fill that void, with the likes of Mr. Kita bringing up the rear. Suppose I’m so impossibly obtuse that I miss every serious signal of marks I haven’t hit and standards not met. Up he pops, observing with a deprecating sneer that, if nothing else, I botch my eggs and

underserve the family I foist them on. “Zing!” My surly comfort here is that others are doing to him as he does to us. I’ll bet he doesn’t drive so well. Blessed be the cop who points this out, or so I mutter.

I itch to be righteous, though it’s more than an itch. You might call it a lust. We all burn with it. The Mr. Kitas of the world know this, as do their editors. Hence the titles they pick. “There’s Only One Right Way to...” It’s like cheese in a mouse trap. We’re certain to nibble.



As it happens, the browser that steered me to scrambled eggs pointed me about the same time to

someone else’s rave review of the speech Bertrand Russell delivered on accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950. It sets out what Russell saw as the fundamental drivers of human behavior: acquisitiveness, rivalry, vanity, love of power. Who am I to argue with an intellect of that caliber? Yet I do. I think Russell missed something. I think the passions he identifies have a common source in this lust to be righteous, where “righteousness” is a quality that others attribute to me.

"He's all right," say they of good old Burce. Or at least he's better than those other schleps: he looks better, talks better, acts better, lives better. He performs better. He certainly "does" better, having just landed the better job or built the better house.

Or, if nothing else, he scrambles eggs that make your mouth water. Therefore "Know thou his ways. Walk in his paths."

And there we have the wickedness and folly that continues to tear the world apart. It happens in ways both macro- and microscopic as would-be gods in their billions vie with each other for the recognition they all crave. See Afghanistan. For that matter see the neighbors who quit talking to each other two weeks ago in a spat over masks.

Consider the possibility that God in his "alien" mercy (to crib from Luther) was behind the browser that touted the headline that snagged my eye and provoked these musings. By alien mercy I mean the kind that leaves the fool naming himself as such when he stares in the mirror. In each of us it takes a lifetime for this job to be completed. The God who is much too kind to leave it unfinished will not relent on pushing it forward. Again, if I'm deaf to Jeremiah he'll send in Mr. Kita, the latter altogether unaware (one guesses) of who he's really working for. The drumbeat message: "You don't have it in you to be as right as you want to be, or even as right as you fancy yourself to be. Not even close."

Or take this still further: consider that the browser itself, inanimate though it be, is operating as God's servant to get the message across. Now there's a thought that will spark derision in puffed-up Silicon Valley. I don't like it much myself—which doesn't mean it isn't true.

I ought to be immune to this scrambled egg nonsense, but I'm not. Obviously. Nor will I be until the Spirit wraps up the new creation project that launched in me the day God got me baptized. So too with the people I've been preaching to these past forty-plus years—those still with us, that is.

The Lutheran term for our condition is *simul iustus et peccator*; at once a saint and a sinner, as we usually say in English.



At once a trust-er and a lust-er. That's another way to say it in even plainer English.

The news at anyone's baptism is good beyond measure. In the case of babies, it's signified by the white robes their parents commonly present them in. In every case, it's sealed as a certainty by the cross traced on the baptizand's forehead.

A quick caveat: given the shape of the times and the realities we wrestle with, I can't help but wonder if the color white will soon give away to something else, I know not what, as the visual sign of baptism's gift. Perhaps a many-hued robe like the one

Joseph wore as a sign of his favored status? That would work.

Favored status, after all, is precisely what God grants in baptism. Attached as we now are to the Favored One—"this is my Son, with whom I well pleased"—you and I are favored too. "All right!" the Father says of us in the same exultant voice that sprung Jesus from his tomb on Easter morning. Or so we get to imagine. So the Spirit prodded us to believe all over again when he told us through Paul some weeks ago that God "...made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..." (Eph. 2:5-6). Where God is concerned, your righteousness and mine is not an issue, be it now or later. This is because God is rich in the "proper" mercy that makes right what was wrong and even raises the dead. "By grace you *have been* saved" (Eph. 2:4-5). If egg-scrambling is your thing, then please, take it for granted that the Perfect Scrambler has already given you credit for the unspeakable marvel of his own confections.

Here's what follows: "There you have it, Mr. Kita. Now leave us alone to focus on other things, as in whether our neighbors have any eggs at all, let alone the righteous ones that you insist on."

And yes, sometimes this does follow in baptized me-and-you, if ever so weakly. Rarely does it follow strongly enough to to keep us from clicking on the link to see if somehow, someday, we could be a bit more righteous—more accurately, righteous in a different kind of way—than we already are in Christ Jesus. That's a ludicrous notion if ever there was one. And still we fall for it.

It's a matter of trust versus lust. On the one hand I trust how right I am in Christ Jesus. On the other I lust as every sinner does to be right on my account, not his. Therein the inner

battle, always with external consequences; the one that will not quit in any of us until we're seated in the refectories of the age to come for the Best Breakfast Ever.

Some months ago I caught a woman who works in the headquarters of a mainline denomination grinding her teeth about the "virtue-signaling" the place is riddled with. I asked if she was hearing sounds of the Gospel in the chapel services there. "Not so much," she said.

I have no doubt whatsoever that lots of strutting goes on in the "evangelical" top-shops too, countermanded by too little preaching of the Law that mocks it and the benefits of Christ that render it nonsensical. As I think of it, one of Christ's best gifts is the ability to laugh at ourselves at once ruefully and cheerfully in the confidence that Christ makes and keeps us right in spite of our stupidity.

That's one of the great treats of this liturgical year of Mark. Week after week we get to watch Jesus enduring his ridiculous disciples without once thinking to give up on them. See how he scrambles our assumptions about righteousness and what it is. What he winds up sliding onto our plates is a marvel beyond all marvels.

Every Sunday I look at people caught in this battle between lust and trust. It starts when I'm shaving.

My job is to preach Christ. Nothing less—no one less—will spark the easy-going, self-forgetful joy that God so wants his children to revel in. How else, per Philippians 2:15, shall we shine like stars in the world in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation that takes its scrambled eggs way too seriously?

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community