Luther and the Liberation of the Laity: Part II: The Freedom They Employ

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Freedom is:
Heading home
On the heels of Jesus
By way of the slums
Your old neighborhood
Unintimidated by the slumlords
But also warmly respectful of them
Pausing to explain
(in case they should ask)
Why you can be both
And so can they.

Those words about I Peter are Bob Bertram's. They are the best re-wording of freedom in praxis ala I Peter that I could find, so I appropriated them. (Remember from last evening "All things are yours!") As you may have surmised, this First Epistle of Peter is a primary source for the theology and praxis of our Crossings Community in St. Louis, committed as we are to crossing the secular worlds our students come from with the Word of God.

"Heading home on the heels of Jesus." That says in seven words what two-thirds of my presentation sought to say last evening:

appropriating the biography of Jesus as the Christ into one's own biography by trusting the promise "for you" (a quasi commercial exchange) and thus moving forward now with dual citizenship (two passports). An exile here heading toward the homeland still ahead. "Leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps." (2:21)

The next line is: "by way of the slums, your old neighborhood." This line pinpoints the locale for this exilic existence. It's here on the ground, in the regular old world, the locale of our first passport. For most of the folks in this audience I imagine those two lines are not synonyms—the slums, your old neighborhood. Insofar as the old neighborhood is really old, as in "old aeon," it too is a slum by comparison with the goodness and the newness of the Good News. In Peter's language the common denominator between the world that is slum and your old neighborhood is that they both are territories for the exercise of justice, God's justice. In the former case (slum) a justice that is largely absent, in the second case (if your old neighborhood is like mine) a justice that is more often executed. It is the proper territory of the "human institutions" ordained by God with institutional managers "sent by God to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right."

The way home on the heels of Jesus is the very Way he himself trod by way of the slums and the old neighborhoods. Just because he already passed through, his fellow-travelers are not exempt from the same route. The grammar of Peter's ethical admonitions throughout is "Since Christ…., therefore you…" (4:1) That is the new grammar of grace imperatives: "Since, therefore." The grammar of the old imperatives is "If…, then…", conditional. And that is the grammar of the legal justice that the exiles are attuned to in the turf of their first passport: If wrongdoing, then punishment; If right doing, then praise. (2:14)

But the exiles' sojourn is not flight from the world. It is not a case of "Love it or leave it." To this either/or that is fundamental to the old creation's grammar, the gospel offers (always!) a third alternative. It is a new way with new grammar arising from a new word to do both. When St. Paul is confronted with this either/or, either you have it or you don't have it (spouse, grief, joy, goods, "dealings with the world"), he proposes the rubric: "Having as though you didn't have it." (I Cor 7:29-31) And the only way to make sense of that non-sense is to bring in a third term, the biography of Jesus.

Peter's way of grounding this third option is: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy." (2:10) When you have received mercy yourself from God (instead of the justice that we otherwise so desire), then you can have it and have it not. Possess it, but it doesn't possess you. Against the slumlord and the oppressed tenants you will "have it" now for their sakes—and finally even for the slumlords' sakes.

For yourself personally the "don't have it" surfaces. You (like Jesus whose biography is shaping your own) can "do what is right and suffer for it, taking it patiently." Peter prefaces this tolerance of personal injustice with the mind-blowing phrase "operating with God's conscience, you…." And then – as always—he grounds it ("on the heels of Jesus"): "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you [whose injustice caused whom suffering?], leaving you an example (*hypogrammos*, master copy, original) that you should follow in his steps." (2:21f.) Did he just ignore his personal case for justice to himself? It's not an either/or. He did both. Note the argument: He was guiltless. ("He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips.") So justice should have praised him. Yet he was reviled. And then how did he cope? "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; [he did not dish out justice for himself

and for his revilers]; when he suffered, he did not threaten." So he just caves in on the issue of personal justice? No way! "He trusted the one who judges justly." Justice is indeed his concern, but even when finally vindicated, that is not the end of his biography with justice, his own personal justice. No, his personal justice program is more expansive (and expensive) than that.

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree [keep clear which role we play in the justice-and-Jesus story] that we might die to sin and live to justice." The justice-agenda of the unjustly crucified suffering servant is a program for cosmic justice, to get people living <u>for</u> justice. And the one place where that kind of living, those kinds of strangers and aliens, are surely needed is where it's not yet happening. "Heading home on the heels of Jesus by way of the slums, your old neighborhood." Thirty-five years ago the "slums" of Valpo were Locust street, the west edge of our campus; we walked (only the GIs had cars) "by way of those slums" as we went back-and-forth downtown. We did a little palliative work there, but the issue of "justice" never occurred to us. How often does it occur to you today, on campus or at its edges? How are you doing today in employing the liberation you are enjoying?

But you probably don't even have to move off campus to encounter injustice. Any "old neighborhood" can be a slum in this sense when praise and punishment get flip-flopped from their rightful recipients, when fairness fails. You name the places—I know you've got a list, every one of you—and with slumlord names very clearly designated. Well, there's a turf for employing your freedom, a slum-clearance project right here in our old neighborhood. But it's not simply to give the slumlords their comeuppance, although it <u>is</u> that too. But it is to finally save their lives. Justice plus.

One of Peter's images for this is the calling to "un-curse" the world, aka "blessing." "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing." (3:8-9) Did you ever think that the prominence of the curse in American profanity might not be laid to the meanness of those doing it, but to their accurate perception that huge areas of the world of our first passports are "one damn thing after another"? The un-cursing of the world, if anybody could be free enough and powerful enough to do that, would surely be a blessing. Whoever could do that would have to have real connections. The merely baptized?

> *"Heading home on the heels of Jesus by way of the slums, your old neighborhood, unintimidated by the slumlords, but also warmly respectful of them."*

If justice were prevailing in the territory where you are pausing on your journey, "who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is just? But even if you do suffer for justice's sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord." (3:13ff)

This is where the rubber hits the road. To be respectful of the unjust tyrants, but not to fear their tyranny. Isn't that a clear either/or? Peter works this one out in a microcosmic version, the relations between a believing wife and her unbelieving husband. The clue in his proposal is re-focused fear. Getting the tyrant (maybe a milder form of "threatening other") removed from being the object of our fear so that she/he can become some other object, say, the object of our un-cursing. Eight times in this brief epistle Peter mentions fear either as

noun or verb. And his usage is absolutely consistent. The pilgrims are fearless about anything/anyone they encounter in the old-passport's territory, not because they have no fear at all, but because they have got their fear properly focused. Fear's only proper focus is God. To fear God is to confess: my life and destiny, my present and future are dependent on this one and on no other. Says Luther: "The apostle wants us to expect such judgment of God and to be in fear (only of Him)." (34)

Fear is always a theological term. What we fear dominates our lives—bigger and smaller segments of it. But only one *Dominus* has the rightful claim to dominate our lives. So fearing any other is already an incursion into the realm of God's first commandment, as Luther makes perfectly clear in his Small Catechism on the first commandment: "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things."

Back to the case study of the Christian wife.

Peter's words sound unfeeling to our libertarian ear. My concern here is not to rehabilitate Peter insofar as he is off-base. (Luther was off-base about the Jews, Paul was off-base about women; Peter might well be too.) But he does have a proposal that is winsome for its Jewish chutzpah, better yet its gospel-grounding, even if he still sounds like a chauvinist (who hasn't yet got the lively hope functioning in all of his consciousness). Here's the text:

> Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart

> with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you. Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered. (3:1-7)

Track through these points:

1. The alternative to "submission" for Christians in Peter's time was not "rebellion," but to opt out of daily life in the old Creation. Peter's counsel: "Don't do that. Hang in there."

2. Who is promised to be the winner?

3. The way she "wins" is not by being "total woman," but by her character as "person." Her biography, double biography, double subjectivity.

4. What finally wins her husband? She is in fear, but not of him. Vis-à-vis him she can be gentle and serene since God alone is to be feared (and that fear she has already had trumped for herself (via Christ's biography). Honor the husband. Fear him, no. "Honor," says ML, "has many interpreters." His interpretation is "behavior mindful that so-and-so is a Christian too (or in this case potentially one) and is God's work or vessel." Thus in honoring someone I "have regard for God's work and will" re this other one. This the heathen lack, since "they do not know what God wants." (92)

5. The bottom line is in I Peter 3:14: "But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed."

6. Her meekness puts her in good company (Sarah, but even more prestigious company, the suffering servant of the Old Testament and the New).

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The proper ministry of lay people is not first of all one of proclamation or public leadership in the congregation. Peter's Greek term used over-and-over again here is *anastrophe* (translated: behavior). The word behavior is flat. *Anastrophe*, according to Liddell & Scott, is "a turning upside down, upsetting. A turning back, return. Wheeling about. In the passive mood a dwelling in a place, a mode of life, 'conversation' (NT). The place where one tarries, an abode, haunt."

Lifestyle, quality of life, how you cope – a University is the place where contemporary re-wording of these classics needs to be done, where folks know both the languages. The wife's *anastrophe* is a topsy-turvy third option. It <u>does</u> communicate. "Indirect discourse" is what Kierkegaard would designate this. But then if and when they do ask, the merely baptized is expected to be sufficiently theologically knowledgeable that she can re-word it for the questioner. Luther's biggest plea for lay theology and lay theologians (though he resents the excluding character of the term laity) is made here:

> “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.” St. Peter is addressing these words to all Christians, to priests, laymen, men and women, young and old, and in whatever station they are. Therefore it follows from this that every Christian should account for his faith and be able to give a reason and an answer when necessary….Hence if someone tackles you, as if you were a heretic, and asks: “Why do you believe that you are saved through faith?” then reply: “I have God’s Word and clear statements of Scripture….And above (1 Peter 2:6) when St. Peter, on the basis of the prophet Isaiah (28:16), speaks of Christ, the Living Stone, he says: ‘He who believes in Him will not be put to shame.’ I build on this, and I know that the Word does not deceive me.” (p. 105f.)

And what you explain—as you pause on your own journey – is “why you can be both and so can they.” You explain the third option for living between Scylla and Charybdis, between damned if I do and damned if I don’t.

Here’s how we’ve come to articulate it in our Crossings Community:

Some Features of Lay Ministry and Therefore of Lay Theology:

1. The proper ministry of lay people in the world is not primarily a ministry of proclamation or even of public leadership in the church.

2. Lay people provide a Christian “presence” in the world, yes, but most often *incognito* (Ellul, Dimitriu).

3. Their “witness” relies most heavily on Christian ethos, less so on explicit Christian kerygma.

4. For them theology is not a first but a second vocation,

though definitely a vocation.

5. Their secular milieu is, at best, Law-dominant, not Gospel-dominant.

6. Lay people's faith needs to be, in rare measure, publicly accountable, in that sense "rational."

7. Their publics are decidedly not denominational but cross-cultural and ecumenical.

8. They are deployed as exiles into the Old Age (*saeculum*).

9. They are beset by peculiar temptations:

a. Faith seems "impractical."
b. The gathered church seems "unreal," irrelevant.
c. The secular sector seems not to be "the Lord's."
d. The world cannot be "crossed" with the Word.
e. Christianity, to be relevant, must be legalistic.
f. Sunday Christianity, to be a relief from the world, must be antinomian.
g. Lay people are most Christian when they are amateur preachers, proclaimers.

10. Lay Christians are the shock-troops of Creation, also of the New Creation.

11. They need a talent not so much for preaching as for how to hear preaching, and to re-Word it for themselves.

12. They have to brave the loneliness of the weekday diaspora.

13. In the gathered church they not only need theological help in "crossing" the Word with their secular worlds, they need that help from one another, as an explicitly mutual theological community.

14. The arena of their theological praxis is not the church as such but the Kingdom, to which the church is in service.

Luther_Liberation_II