

“One for All and All in One”: A pitch for your presence at the forthcoming Crossings conference via some ruminating on Good Friday prayers.

Colleagues,

Let's start with the [conference](#). It happens next January in Belleville, Illinois, at the end of the month. For the fifth time since 2007 the Crossings Community will meet around a topic that cuts to the heart of our avocational calling as a band of drum-beaters for the proper distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel, and for the clarity of thought and proclamation that ensues from that. I say “avocational” because the people who sign off on our job descriptions haven't told us to beat those drums, and few if any of them expect us to do it. We beat them anyway—on the side, as time allows. It strikes us as pressing and important, especially when it comes to the matter of proclamation, the aim being, as prior conferences have underscored, that the Church's preaching and teaching should be infused with honesty: honesty about the Gospel and our need for it (2007), honesty about the God whose Gospel it is (2008), honesty about the mission the Gospel gives rise to (2010), and honesty about the word “disciple” and what that entails when the disciples in question are hearers of the Gospel (2012).

It suddenly strikes me that we'd do well to make God's Law the focus of a conference one of these years. Talk about a topic that we sinners who preach and teach in the Church are inclined to be dishonest about. Because of that the Gospel takes a

beating. Pope Francis surprised the world by intimating as much in [the remarkable interview](#) that his fellow Jesuits published a couple of months ago. Here's a sample that didn't show up in the newspaper reports:

The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, 'This is not a sin' or something like that.

The result (says Francis) is a loss of "the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel." Now there's a phrase to roll your tongue around and repeat with pleasure, or at least until it sinks in how frequently the Law's misuse fills our own churches with a stale old stink. It's a topic, like I say, that begs for focused, communal thought in a community that cares about such things. Who knows, in 2016, maybe?

Meanwhile 2014 beckons with a topic that's equally urgent, and in some ways related. In a word, "pluralism." More pointedly, how do fans of the good news of God in Jesus Christ respond to the plethora of accounts about God that don't have the Christ of Trinitarian confession squarely in the picture? And still more sharply, what are the implications of that response for fellow human beings who cling to their Christ-less god or gods with tenacity and rigor, and in many cases with as much honesty as any band of sinners can hope to muster on their own, not excluding the band of sinning creatures that will cluster at our

conference?

And all this is merely prelude to the genuine questions, genuine because they're the ones that come into actual play as we rub elbows with other human beings. So, for example, how shall we love the "dear disbeliever"—thus Bob Bertram—with a love that reflects and honors our Lord's surpassing love for her? How shall we pray for him? What gifts does God present us in and through them, and how shall we receive these gifts without minimizing the astonishing Christic gift that God has given us to pass along? And so forth.

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I trust, of course, that the conversation at Belleville will waste no time in getting down to questions of this "rubber-meets-the-road" variety. If it doesn't happen in the formal presentations where groundwork is laid, it will surely bubble up in the talk that goes on around coffee pots and bottles of wine at day's end. How could it not? After all, there's not a one of us who doesn't deal with these issues every day. Life and service in the present age of sin demands it. I mean "sin" in the sense captured to piercing effect by the final line of the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). Yes, and in these days there is no king in America or anywhere else in the world, at least none that commands universal allegiance, and it sure isn't Christ; with the consequence that more and more people insist on *believing* "what [is] right in their own eyes." I'm expecting keynoter Steve Kuhl to insist at the conference that pluralism as a theological proposal and operative religious construct is a recent innovation. I'll bet he also points out how the innovation is nothing more than the latest effort to address a condition that's as old as the hills. Eve to Adam (or vice versa): "*Don't* tell me what to think! Don't you dare!" And both said—and say—the same to God. And all

through the ages they keep groping for ways to get along despite their disagreements about ultimate things. What is street-level pluralism ("We all believe in/worship/serve the same god, we just do it in different ways") if not the latest version of that groping? A fascinating version, to be sure, where the fascination lies not least in its duplicity. On the surface it smiles and offers the peace of a friendly truce, all acquiescing in the twin propositions that no one's tale of the Unseen is "privileged," and that the One or Ones Unseen not only won't mind this removal of privilege but are predisposed to bless it. But suppose one begs to differ with this theory, or even to raise a thoughtful question about it? At that point the teeth behind the smile will start snapping and biting, the way teeth always do when dogma is challenged. (Fast question: what's the difference between a pluralist and a fundamentalist? Fast answer: the dogma each favors.)

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Comes the challenge: the people I spend time with don't do well with snapping teeth. Nor do I, for that matter. Amity is our thing, and for the sake of finding it we'll backpedal even when we shouldn't. The temptation to do that will be all the stronger when the people snarling are the putative proponents of amity and concord, whose objection to us as Lutheran confessors, say, is that our fixation on Christ, the Prince of Peace, is a sin of sorts against peace.

Come the questions: could this be why the confessing of Christ in some Lutheran circles is more flaccid than it was a few decades ago? Or in deeming it flaccid, am I merely imagining things? For my own small part, I'd love to find some folks at Belleville to bat these things around with.

And supposing that kind of conversation did break out one evening over libations of one sort or another, I would toss out

the following example, one among many, of the sort of thing I've been running across in my ordinary pastoral duties that causes the antennae to twitch and a tooth or two to grind in bemusement, at least, if not in consternation. And in the mind, meanwhile, the little flag pops up: "What's with this?"

Below are three prayers. They come from successive hymnals, the ones I've been given to use and pray from over the course of my life thus far. The first is *The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH) of my Missouri Synod boyhood, the second is *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW), published the year before I graduated from seminary, and the third is *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), as of 2006 the officially favored liturgical resource for ELCA congregations. In each case the prayer is one of several collects, as we used to call them, appointed for the Church's intercessory prayer on Good Friday. The matter each addresses is the obvious reality of a world teeming with people who don't believe in Christ and don't intend to start. You'll notice that TLH refers to such people as "the heathen." Such was the Christian bluntness of the early 1940's and the nineteen centuries prior. LBW dropped that language. I can't imagine anyone on ELW's editorial team daring to say the word at all for fear of being fired. For what it's worth, I heartily concur that politeness pleases the Lord and serves his mission far more effectively than rudeness does.

Notice too that the LBW and ELW prayers come with prescribed introductions to be offered by an assisting minister. TLH was not that fancy. The liturgical reforms launched in earnest by Vatican II had not yet happened.

With that as background, here are the prayers in succession. Read them closely—

TLH:

Almighty and everlasting God, who desirest not the death of a sinner, but wouldest have all men to repent and live, hear our prayers for the heathen, take away iniquity from their hearts, and turn them from their idols unto the living and true God and to Thine only Son; and gather them into Thy holy Church, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord.

LBW:

Let us pray for those who do not believe in Christ, that the light of the Holy Spirit may show them the way of salvation.

Almighty and eternal God, enable those who do not acknowledge Christ to receive the truth of the Gospel. Help us, your people, to grow in love for one another, to grasp more fully the mystery of your Godhead, and so to become more perfect witnesses of your love in the sight of all people. We ask this through Christ our Lord. (LBW, *Minister's Desk Edition*, p. 141)

ELW:

Let us pray for those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ

Almighty and eternal God, gather into your embrace all those who call out to you under different names. Bring an end to inter-religious strife, and make us more faithful witnesses of the love made known to us in your Son. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Some observations:

1. The shifts of thought and assumption from one prayer to the next are impossible to miss. They're also tough to pin down and explain. Liturgical editors, like Biblical translators, aren't obliged to provide the rest of us with an accounting for the decisions they make as they go along. I often wish they would be.
2. The most obvious shift is in the description—and implicit

evaluation—of the people being prayed for. In TLH they're worshipers of dead idols who need to be turned to "the living and true God." LBW names them as people who don't "acknowledge Christ" or accept "the truth of the Gospel," a subtle step or two removed from seeing them as thralls of lifeless falsehood. In ELW they are people who "call out to [God] under different names" and suffer (as we do too?) from "inter-religious strife."

3. Accompanying the above are shifts in the problem or problems that God is being asked to address. In TLH—which, by the way, is merely repeating a centuries-old prayer in the Church's Western Latin tradition—the problem rests strictly with "the heathen" who worship falsely. LBW and ELW identify lack and fault more inclusively. Indeed both quickly swivel the focus of the praying onto the heads of the praying Christians, who are insufficiently "perfect" or "faithful" in their witness to God's love, to the detriment—perhaps that's implied—of the people who don't "believe in Christ" (LBW) or "share our faith" in him (ELW).
4. Finally, there are shifts in the outcome sought for the unbaptized. TLH: that their iniquity be taken away, their hearts turned to God *and* to Christ, His Son, and that they be gathered into the Church. LBW: that they receive "the truth of the Gospel," a phrase that could well say as much as the TLH prayer says, though it could also say less. ELW: that they be gathered into God's "embrace," whatever that may mean and however it may happen.
5. And what's the role of Christ crucified—it's Good Friday, remember—in achieving these objectives? TLH: he's the person given for people to repent toward, and through him to God. LBW, per the prayer's opening bid: he's the "way of salvation." ELW: he's the one who makes God's love known "to us," if not yet or even necessarily to the

disbelieving others.

For now my sole and wholly inadequate observations on all this are, first, that the theological distance between the prayer of my boyhood and the prayer intended for my latter working years is noticeable, if not considerable; and second, that insofar as the Church's prayer gives shape to the Church's believing—*lex orandi, lex credendi*, as the cogniscenti like to say—then something different is being conveyed these days about the roles of Christ and faith in God's great project of getting sinners reconciled to Godself and enveloped in salvation. Something different: that's all I'm saying at the moment; not something better or something worse, something more faithful to the apostolic Gospel or something more removed from it. Simply something different: that's where I leave it for now. The prospect of taking up those other questions with fellow confessors is a reason that I, for one, am looking forward to Belleville.

I'm curious, after all, whether I'm alone in sensing some evolution here, not only in tone but also in confession, or whether others feel it too. I'm just as curious as to whether others are spotting a similar evolution in other facets of the prayer, witness, and proclamation that the church bodies we belong to currently promote and endorse. And if so, then I'm especially curious as to how others will interpret this, whether as an improvement, long overdue, in our telling of the Gospel, or as a worrisome sign of failing Christian nerve in the face of rising demands to stick our Jesus in the corner and leave him there, where he won't provoke objection among those who "call out to [the same-and-only God] by different names," or by no name at all, for that matter.

Could be, of course, that we'll conclude after much conversation that both these things, improvement and failing nerve, are

unfolding these days in the churches we know and serve. That's certainly possible. Indeed it's likely. Then will come the big question of how we ourselves are called to respond in the work God gives us to do.

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All this is finally to say that there's lots to keep the talk lively and long as our Belleville days unfold, a mere eight weeks from now. I hope you can be there to share in that. If not, pray for those who will be. In case you haven't heard, the ELCA's new presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, has recently confirmed a commitment she made before her late-August election to serve as preacher at our conference eucharist. She'll also join a Tuesday afternoon panel of synodical bishops to discuss their hopes for the Church's confession in a pluralistic era. That too is a compelling reason to check in at the event. For essential details, and to register, see the Crossings [website](#).

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team