

“Pardon My Dying: A Sequel to Ash Wednesday”

Colleagues,

Richard Weaver, a ThTh regular, Seminex alum and ELCA pastor in Ohio, asks me to ask you for prayers on behalf of his wife Estelle, undergoing a complex heart surgery on the Thursday date of this posting. So I'm sending ThTh #195 out a day early for you to do so. Another reason for posting on Wednesday is that Marie and I will leave later today for the family funeral of Dor(othy) Hoyer, wife of Marie's brother George. Besides being family, George and Dor—known to many of you—are Seminex co-confessors from those ancient days. Dor also was kindergarten teacher (a superstar in that calling) for one of our kids in St. Louis.

Dor's death is #5 in our family/friends network during the two months we've been in New England. They've never come so close, so fast, so many, for us before. It's “memento mori—remember that you must die.” Which, of course, were the words we heard on Ash Wednesday just a few days ago as we got marked on the forehead: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

That all brings with it another memento linked to Ash Wednesday. Namely, Bob Bertram's chapel sermon at Concordia Seminary on the day after Ash Wednesday in 1972. That's 30 years ago. Bob's sermon constitutes today's posting. Here's the context. Bob and I had recently attended a conference of ITEST, the St. Louis-based “Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology.” Bob himself and St. Louis University Jesuit priest-scientist Bob Brungs, co-founders of ITEST, had chaired the sessions. The topic was something like “The Reality of Death in

Today's High-Tech Medicine."

I gave a paper examining St. Paul's label for death as the "last enemy." The book by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross "Death and Dying" was a big hit at the time. Although she was not on the program, her analysis of death was very much part of the discussion. Still in my mind is the table conversation Bob and I had with another ITESTer—a Lutheran hospital chaplain. He was "sold" on Kubler-Ross and her claim that human death was "natural" and, according to the final step of her paradigm, to be "accepted." Paul had gotten it wrong, he thought, and consequently so had I.

Bob's chapel sermon was his return to that table-talk. His words take on additional meaning after 30 years as the last enemy now presses his case against Bob.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

PARDON MY DYING ***A SEQUEL TO ASH WEDNESDAY***

Today's first lesson recalls yesterday's Imposition of the Ashes, Genesis 3:19: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." The second lesson is I Corinthians 15:49: "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

*'A conversation overheard,
at least imagined,
a private conversation*

*between a husband and his wife—
she on her deathbed,
he seated close beside,
both of them hoping still to say
what needed saying most
before the end.* “Before I leave,” she said,
“I do have something to confess.”

“Please don’t,” he said
“Now’s not the time for that.
If there’s confessing to be done,
let’s let it go at saying
you’re my girl
and that I’ve loved you always.”

“That’s right,” she said, *I’m only yours.
And that you love me, that I know.
It’s just because you do
that I believe
that you could handle
my confession now.*”

“But don’t you understand,”
he said,
“that I don’t need
for you to say you’re sorry,
not for anything.”

“Well,” she agreed, *“you may not need that
but I do.
And I do understand
that if I have that need
—the need to make confession
and to be forgiven—
you’re strong enough to hear me out.”*

*"Maybe," said he, "I'm not so strong at that,
At least I'm not afraid
that some last, unacknowledged sin
still stands between us.
And if I'm not afraid of that,
why should you be?"*

*"Oh, Adam, you poor dear,
Is that what you had thought I said,
that I'm afraid,
that that was why
I wanted to confess?
I'm not afraid, at least not much.
At any rate that wasn't why
I wanted to apologize:
not out of fear
but out of hope.
I dare to hope that I'm absolved
and hoping that, I want to hear you say
I really am.
And hoping that I am
does make it easier to say
I'm sorry."*

*"All right," said he, "You win.
What is there to forgive?"*

*"Forgive my dying.
Pardon this damned mortality."*

*"Your dying? Pardon that?
But girl," said he,
"that's something you can't help.
Dying is . . .
only natural."*

*"No, it's not natural at all,"
she said.*

*"Life wasn't meant to die.
Neither were we.*

We both know that.

*We've known that ever since
we've known of Easter.*

Death isn't natural at all.

It's a downright dirty, dastardly demeaning defeat.

*We're not meant to 'accept' it,
not even if with 'dignity.'*

*We're meant to trump it,
as we shall."*

"But then," said he,

*"if death is conquered anyway,
if we outlast it,*

(and we shall)

*why do you still think
dying needs forgiving?"*

*"Does that," she asked, "disturb you so,
for me to say that death*

*is what we've brought upon ourselves,
what we've got coming to us?*

*Does that strike you as morbid,
despite the fact I'm not afraid?*

*Despite the fact that it's my hope
and not my fear*

*which frees me to admit
the shame of dying,*

do you see that

as merely clinical escape?

Come, Adam, can't you deal with that?

I believe you can."

*"I wouldn't say," said he,
"that that is morbid.
Still, it does seem --
how shall I say? --
a bit too self-important
for us to take the credit for
so vast a thing as death.
Are we, for all our guilt,
really that influential?"*

*"That does seem hard to believe,"
she said,
"unless we manage first to believe
that God is interested enough to judge
because he's still more interested
in resurrecting and forgiving.
For him to let us die is judgment,
not contempt.
And there's a difference.
Ignore us? That he never does.
But deal with us he does.
That important we all are."*

*"But then," said Adam,
"why do you
ask now to be forgiven
by me?
Forgiveness, yes. But why from me?
I'm not the one who judges you."*

*"But you're the one I hurt.
For, Adam dear,
I do hurt you by dying.
You know I do.
It hurts me, too, of course."*

*Death even hurts my vanity.
Death isn't pretty
and, as you know,
I've always liked being pretty.
But worse than that by far,
it hurts to have to liquidate
the fondest love affair
that any wife could want.
And it's for that, for interrupting that,
That I do say I'm sorry."*

*To which he said, "I do forgive,
I too forgive."*

*"And thanks for that," said she.
"Meanwhile, Adam, think spring.
Think Christ."*

"I'll see you later, girl."

*Robert W. Bertram
Concordia Seminary
St. Louis, Missouri
17 February 1972*