

Preaching the Gospel (again!)

Colleagues,

It's clearly a bone caught in my craw (or a barley-beard inside my pants leg, as we used to say back on the farm 60 yrs ago). Namely, preaching, less-than-Gospel preaching—and that from preachers who know the Gospel, but (apparently) don't notice when they are NOT preaching it.

Case in point.

Background: Every two years on the first weekend in August the Schroeder clan gathers for the family reunion back home at Grandpa and Grandma Schroeder's farm in NW Illinois. After five generations it's still a Schroeder farm. So a big bunch of us gathered there two weeks ago. There are something like 270 direct descendents of that immigrant pair who came to America in the 1880s. For the umpteen of us Schroeder cousins who grew up on the four farms that bordered "Schroeder Road" August 1 was always picnic time. It was Grandma's birthday. She was born in 1874, 126 years ago.

Most of the clan is still churchy, and most of these are in Missouri Synod congregations. For the (maybe) one-quarter of us in the clan who are ex-Missouri Lutherans, a local ELCA church is where we show up for worship on reunion Sunday. It's a big congregation—big staff, great spirit, great music, great senior pastor, who's also a great preacher. Except for this Sunday he didn't preach the Gospel. The 20 or so of us who worshipped there Reunion Sunday (Aug. 6) gossiped about that "real absence" at the picnic tables under the shade trees over fried chicken, baked beans and potato salad later in the day.

The sermon text was the second slice of John 6 (verses 14-36),

the second of about five slices that the lectionary is serving us here toward the end of summer in the northern hemisphere.

The post mortem on the sermon went something like this—

Someone noticed that THE NAME didn't get dropped until the votum at the end of the homily—"And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father..." Not ever mentioned before. God's faithfulness to "give us THIS DAY our daily bread," and our call to trust God for this, was the message from the manna that was put on our plate.

Well, then was the crucified/risen Christ needed or not for the sermon to achieve its purpose? Probably not. But all of us in the congregation this morning were already Christians, someone proposed, so the preacher presupposed that we were Christ-trusters already. Even if that were true (and how can anyone tell?) can that ever be taken for granted in Christian proclamation? Didn't Doc Caemmerer, of blessed memory, say: A sermon that "takes the Gospel for granted" is a sermon with no Gospel in it?

And wasn't there all that hassle in the Reformation era about "necessitating" Christ? Can you necessitate something without ever mentioning it? Granted, mere name-dropping is not necessitating. What the Reformers were urging upon the pastors of their day was to weave in the Christ-quotient in such a way that you couldn't get to the desired goal without it.

The goal of the Aug. 6 sermon was clear: to get us to trust God for our own daily bread—and do so day by day "with no thought for the morrow." What the sermon could/did presuppose in us hearers was that we were indeed all hoarders, giving humongous energy to "thought for the morrow," and all that intensified in America as we're bombarded by a consumer culture that "required" such futurism of us. Such a mindset and such behavior are rooted

in the un-faith endemic to us all. So much for the sermon's diagnosis of us hearers.

What some Schroeders thought they heard as the proposed remedy for that malady was: "Stop it. Why? God is indeed trustworthy for day-by-day sustenance. He did it for the original Manna-nites; he promises to do it for us. Ergo trust God." No Christ component was mentioned (thus not needed?) to move us from malady to goal. Is that enough to transform a hoarding heart? Probably not.

In the Sunday's Gospel itself the text's alternatives are two kinds of feedings, Moses's and Jesus's. And both of them come from God! For John those two feedings signal two kinds of faith-ings. Then what's the difference between trusting God for daily bread ala Moses, and ditto ala Christ? John 6 says you can see one big difference in the results of those two kinds of feedings: life or death.

That's heavy bread, someone punned. If the preacher had needed to necessitate Christ to get us to the sermon's goal, where would/could it have come?

Right about there in this preaching-post-mortem someone shouted: "Hey, there's Whitey's ice cream for dessert—three different kinds!" All Schroeders know that Whitey's is creme-de-la-creme in more ways than one. We also know that in this crowd Whitey's (like manna) wouldn't last til the morrow. So the agenda changed. Moses won. In a post-post-mortem some thought that also in the sermon Moses won. A pity.

Even so, Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder