Response to Jungkuntz homily

Last week we sent you a homily on the question of Christian obedience by Richard Jungkuntz, who served as provost at Pacific Lutheran University. This week, as promised, we bring you an analysis of that homily by Robert C. Schultz. Bob is former ELCA pastor and an active member of the Crossings community whose doctorate was on the role of law and gospel in Lutheran theological history of the nineteenth century. In this commentary, Bob digs thoughtfully into the questions that Jungkuntz asks in his homily and the audience-based context in which those questions are asked and answered. We think you'll benefit from his insights.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Rich Jungkuntz once again brings a thought-provoking piece from his father's files. Some of my thoughts as I read it and my reflections on its uniqueness follow.

1. This homily offers rich potential for analysis and discussion. I have found it to be very thought-provoking for a number of reasons. Among these are the following:
    a. The text of the homily is a passage from John 8 that is—in its original context and in terms of its content as distinguished in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession—law and certainly not gospel. On my list of favorite texts, it ranks far below even "Alexander the coppersmith has done me much evil!" At least on first impression, it seems that Jesus is sharply condemning his hearers.

The text seems to appear in the homily as the basis for an illustration of “hearing.” Would the homily be different if the text described “hearers” in some other way?

b. The author explicitly relates this homily to his understanding of law and gospel.

c. A major content of the homily is an explicit discussion of its underlying basis in systematic and hermeneutical theology and its corresponding assumptions.

2. The homily is addressed to a very specific and limited audience with unique characteristics: Lutheran college students who are almost all between eighteen and twenty-two years old and living in a very competitive environment that emphasizes success and failure. These students may bring with them a common liturgical and educational experience in a specific Lutheran tradition and are still attending chapel services. The homilist may safely assume that background.

    a. The author focuses his analysis on the point at which the developmental needs of this audience are related to the illustration that he uses. I personally formulate my understanding of this in terms of Erik Erikson’s scheme of epigenetic personal development. These students are in an extended adolescence in the course of which they repeat and reprocess developmental tasks of childhood in a variety of situations. They are finding new layers of their own personal identity. Others may have other frameworks for understanding this homily’s audience, but it is, in my opinion, impossible to speak specifically about and hope to

understand the author's presupposition without some such set of categories of personal development. In terms of Erikson's framework of the stages of personal development, the author assumes that the students are focused on developing their personal identity as individuals and as members of groups, and that they are engaged in recapitulating childhood at the stage of developing a favorable balance between autonomy and shame, which is before the stage of considering guilt versus initiative. (If the terminology is confusing, a glance at this Wikipedia entry may help: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s_stages_of_psychosocial_development#Will:_Autonomy_vs._Shame_.26_Doubt_.28Muscular-Anal.2C_2-4_years.29.) Others may have a better way of understanding what is happening in college that is relevant to this homily. However we describe the situation of this audience, we must ask about the appropriateness of using an illustration from early childhood (learning to walk) that is so far removed from the present experience of the audience ('audience' being, incidentally, another word with the stem "to hear").

b. My understanding of the difference between guilt and shame is that guilt is defined by conformity to a standard based on content: It was wrong; I knew it was wrong; I wanted to do what I knew was wrong; and I did it. On the other hand, shame is more process-oriented: I wanted to do it; I did what I wanted to do; but what I actually did turned out differently than I intended; I may have learned that what I wanted is not what I really wanted; the outcome may not have met my own standards or somebody else's; it may have turned out differently than I wanted or

hoped for when I did it; what I was trying to do may have been right but I did not do it well. I am not in control.

c. Since the author is no longer with us, he must patiently endure both stupid and hopefully not-so-stupid questions and also tolerate our vicarious responses as well as their underlying presuppositions. For example, Suzy will probably often hear someone saying “C’mon, you can do it!” or some variation. Should she respond to all such invitations and imperatives in the same way? Few of us would want Suzy to respond positively every time. How will she know the difference? What makes the difference? How will she know? Can we assume that all the paraenesis she will encounter comes from trustworthy persons? How can she know that a particular preacher is trustworthy? Does the paraenesis become trustworthy because of the person from whom it comes or because of its content or something else or some combination of factors? For the small child, learning to walk is predictably a satisfying and valuable experience. Unless physical handicaps make walking impossible, the child should be encouraged in learning to walk. Even when I fell as a child, I got up and tried again. Although Suzy will often be encouraged to do things that she may later wish she hadn’t, in this case the encourager is someone who loves her and whom she loves and trusts. Although fathers are not always loving and trustworthy, the example used in this homily is clearly defined.

d. Can we assume that God wills the good and that what God wants is good for all? God has reconciled himself to the world and all in it through Christ.

> God now wants us to be reconciled to him. The task of the preacher is not to reconcile God to his or her hearers but to reconcile his or her hearers to God.

Perhaps it will also be useful to consider another possible audience whose members are alcoholics and addicts. There are remarkable (and, so far as I know, still unresearched) examples of large groups overcoming addiction through the influence of pietistic Christian ministries. In our own country, however, the focus before the 1930s was largely on overcoming addiction in the confidence that this was God's will and that it required only the intense cooperation of the addict, who was often offered the alternative of kill or cure. Then, with the support of the Oxford Group—founded by a Lutheran pastor (Frank Buchman) and an Episcopalian priest (Sam Shoemaker)—Alcoholics Anonymous was born and incorporated its wisdom in "the twelve steps." If we assume that God intends that addicts overcome their addiction and find healing, perhaps the first of these twelve steps offers an interesting approach that is either more or less parallel to this homily. For reference, here are the twelve steps in the version provided by the Betty Ford Center:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human

being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

3. The homily explicitly intends to present the distinction between law and gospel. Given its purpose and its specific audience, we must ask whether it succeeds in this purpose. Some will miss terminology or explicit content traditional to that distinction. Perhaps some will find it inadequate in terms of the distinction between the content of the law and of the gospel in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (although the distinction between law and gospel is not explicitly referred to in the Augsburg Confession itself) based on the assertion that all Scripture can be divided into law and gospel. Lutherans traditionally have followed the lead of this approach and have often assumed an Aristotelian focus on content that is focused on issues of guilt and forgiveness of sins. In

contrast, there is, in my opinion, an equally Lutheran, equally acceptable approach, a tradition shaped by rejection of Aristotelian categories that defines the experiences of law and gospel in a variety of ways. This approach surfaces in Article V of the Formula of Concord when it uses the common reservoir of theological terms to define and to distinguish law and gospel in terms of their end effect of generating either mistrust or trust of God. But then, as Robert Preus has pointed out, the Formula of Concord in its entirety and in all its parts has had sometimes little, sometimes no influence on the development of Lutheran theology. [1] I would add the same about later Lutheran theology with notable exceptions such as, but not limited to, C.F.W. Walther in the nineteenth and Werner Elert in the twentieth century. [Note 1: Articles V and VI of the Formula of Concord, which belong together, had little influence upon later Lutheran orthodoxy, although the dogmaticians treated the subjects of the proper distinction between law and gospel and the Third Use of the law." "Influence of the Formula of Concord on the Later Lutheran Orthodoxy." An essay in *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord*, ed. L. Spitz. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977, p. 93. http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/Influence%20of%20the%20Formula%20of%20Concord%20on%20Later%20Lutheran%20Orthodoxy.pdf.]

It seems to me—and I assume this in the following discussion—that answers can only be understood in terms of the questions to which they respond, and that there is no exclusively right way to ask the questions or respond to them. The way in which we ask our questions, whether Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, Nominalist, rationalistic-scholastic, Enlightened, Newtonian, Einsteinian, existential, ontological, etc., will determine the way in

which we formulate our answers and determine the nature of the answers that we consider relevant, even if we do not necessarily think them as correct answers to other kinds of questions.

Years of dialogue have taught me that it is more important to understand the question than to have a formulaic answer valid for all questions. It has also taught me that a very good sermon in one situation is totally inappropriate in another. Unlike systematic theology which defines its own content and the questions that it asks, the preacher needs to hear, to clarify, and to respond to the questions asked by the audience and to respond to those questions with the gospel. As I think back over my experiences as preacher to a variety of audiences including middle-class suburban families, people in nursing homes, adolescent college students, enlisted or drafted military, mentally ill people with some hope of recovery, mentally ill people warehoused as too ill to treat with no hope of recovery, or residents of a maximum security prison for the criminally insane, etc., I have delivered more than my allotted share of totally irrelevant and contextually meaningless sermons. [2] When I feel a little manic and need a little depression to stay in touch with reality, I go back and read an old sermon manuscript or two. Most painful is the awareness that a specific sermon responded to my questions rather than those in or close to the consciousness of my audience. Does this homily ask and answer questions that its specific audience may have been asking? Obviously, I do not have the information to answer that question. And because audiences who hear sermons from a preacher whom they know commonly add missing material and make corrections, they hear better sermons than those actually preached. In contrast, preachers reading or

hearing someone else's sermon hear the content of the same sermon quite differently.

[Note 2: I have found a little volume of sermons very stimulating to my own reflection in perplexing homiletical situations. *Sermons from Hell: Help for the Distressed*, Ward A. Knights, Jr., ed. (St. Louis, Missouri, Bethany Press, 1975).]

Given those caveats, I would like to have the opportunity to discuss with the author the formulations of his questions and of his answers.

In the last paragraph of the homily, Jungkuntz—speaking to a specific audience—raises four such defining questions:

1) And what about us?

This question applies the question asked at that conference of theologians and reported in the second paragraph of the homily to the PLU chapel audience:

> *….the question being considered at that conference was whether such New Testament injunctions are in fact commandments in the sense of divine Law, or whether they are really just another form of the gracious Gospel, by which we learn that our sins are forgiven and that in Christ Jesus we are freed from the dictates and condemnations of God's holy Law.*

I could only respond to this question by clarifying the terminology. This clearly did not happen in the meeting of theologians at which Dr. B presented his views. Until the sixteenth century, law was simply the Old Testament and gospel was the New Testament. This was a clear content distinction but it was confusing when Lutherans began to

use law and gospel in a new sense. Lutherans therefore had to explain their new perspective and define their new usage of the terms ‘law’ and ‘gospel’. The Apology presents it as a distinction in terms of content. However, as this distinction was applied in pastoral work, there was a growing awareness of the inadequacy of definitions in terms of content and an increasing awareness of process that made simple distinctions on the basis of gospel unsatisfying. This is reflected in Article V of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord as it attempts to merge definitions based on content with the realities of the processes of pastoral care. These discussions were further complicated by Calvin’s focus on the threefold use of the law. (See http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iv.viii.html.) As Robert Preus has pointed out, the Formula of Concord had little influence on seventeenth- and eighteen-century Lutheranism that reduced the distinction between law and gospel to a sub-issue under the means of grace. When nineteenth-century Lutherans attempted to reconnect with early Lutheran theology, they reencountered the issues discussed in Articles V and VI of the Formula of Concord. This is not the place to review the confused discussions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is enough to say here that although Lutherans will ordinarily not deny a distinction between law and gospel, they define it in widely differing ways. The inability of those eighty theologians to agree and perhaps even to understand one another, and Jungkuntz’s summary description of the conversation, do not contribute to clarity. For example, it is difficult for me to understand how I would “learn that my sins are forgiven” from “such New Testament injunctions” as paraenesis and ethical admonitions. Again, I think that we need to have a

discussion of process.

2) What do we hear when we read in the Holy Scriptures those exhortations and imperatives to do thus and so, to be this or that?

The question is asked only in reference to exhortations and imperatives that I read in the Holy Scriptures. Only a very few of these are directly relative to my life situation. So my first question to the author would be whether he is referring only to that small list or whether he is also referring to the myriad analogies that various preachers may use in their attempt to draw many analogies to modern life. The analogy to Suzy's first efforts to walk provoke almost no question except whether she is expected to walk too soon and whether it really is important that she crawl for some appropriate length of time before she is encouraged to walk. I would suspect that most of the behavior questions being faced by even those PLU students would be somewhat more complex and a correct answer much less certain. We today, in any case, live in a culture in the midst of a massive ethical revolution in which there are no longer any generally accepted standards and in which the Bible and the churches no longer play any significant role in determining, communicating, and maintaining those standards. Paul Althaus once wrote,

> *This guidance by the Holy Spirit implies that God's concrete commanding cannot be read off from a written document, an inherited scheme of law. I must learn afresh every day what God wants of me. For God's commanding has a special character for each individual: it is always contemporary, always new. God commands me (and each person) in a particular way, in a different way than He*

commands others…. The living and spiritual character of the knowledge of what God requires of men in the present moment must not be destroyed by rules and regulations.[Paul Althaus, The Divine Command: a New Perspective on Law and Gospel. Translated by Franklin Sherman. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1966, pp. 43 and 45). I was looking for the translation of this on the web and came across the quotation on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_and_Gospel. (Retrieved June, 2014). Does anyone know the author? (Appears not to be a Lutheran since the Apology is attributed to Luther.)]

3) On what wavelength do we tune in?

This question is a creative contribution to the discussion of the process by which law and gospel are distinguished. The Apology's division of the Scripture into two categories was a division on the basis of content. No matter how useful it is, there are problems. Luther himself reports that he once heard the gospel when the monk (probably Staupitz?) to whom he was confessing his inability to trust in God reminded him that God commands Luther and all of us to trust in God. The authors of the Formula of Concord document their own experience that the communication of content of the gospel in its narrow sense can result in unfaith. I expect that more than one of us can validate that from our own experience. The Augustana surprisingly says nothing about the distinction between law and gospel but does assert that the Holy Spirit works when and where He wills. We as preachers are often surprised by our experience of that fact in practice. Jungkuntz appears to suggest that at least one way in which content (in this case, what appears to be law) can

be described in practice is as the “wavelength” over which it is transmitted or to which our receiver is tuned. It would be interesting to know if Jungkuntz developed this concept further elsewhere.

4) Do we hear Law or Gospel?

Without assuming your answer, I can only ask, What do you hear? I think I hear gospel. This approach seems to me to be rooted in Luther’s basic rejection of the Aristotelian presuppositions of Neoplatonism or Scholasticism. Lutherans have not always agreed with Luther at that point and have constantly reshaped Luther’s insights to be relevant to their own way of thinking. This approach also seems to me to be in the tradition of Walther’s lectures on law and gospel. While errors have much in common, the truth of the gospel is expressed best in terms that respond directly to the situation of the hearer. In pastoral care, process is more important than content. I think this homily is an excellent example of that approach.

Whatever we hear, this homily was not written for us. We are eavesdroppers on a conversation between the provost and those students attending chapel on that day—and we know enough about being both students and preachers ourselves that we can make some intelligent guesses about the dynamics of that congregation.

How might this homily have intersected with the students’ experience? We all know what it’s like to be a college student. Even before you can pay the tuition, you have to be admitted. To be admitted to a school that acts responsibly in relation to its students, i.e. not a for-profit school, you have to prove not merely that you want

to be a college student and are able to pay the tuition but that you can learn and are ready to learn what the college has to teach. Entering college has a great deal of similarity to Suzy's learning to walk. The father wants Suzy to walk and is quite accepting of her stumbling awkward movements. He will accept quite inadequate performance. The college will not (and should not) accept performance that is not up to standard, and by admitting the student it says, "Come join us; you can do it." Since it is not God, the college may be wrong. But God never asks anything more of us than we are able to do. By the standard expected under the gospel, everyone is doing the best he or she can. It may not be good enough for the college but it is good enough for God. That Christian freedom to be what I am liberates me from the performance-reducing effect of not being good enough.

Individual freshmen may be discovering that they were admitted by mistake. Other students who were academic, athletic, and social stars in their local high schools now find themselves competing in quite a different arena and find themselves somewhere in this college's average group. Maybe not good enough to get a scholarship renewed but good enough for God. If a freshman survives that first year, things may get worse, and producing acceptable work may get even more difficult. Sophomores and juniors, as well as seniors now ready to graduate, encounter constantly increasing demands and higher standards until they find that they have reached the level of doing the best they can. The faculty should have high standards for all students. That's the reality of the law in the narrow sense. Evaluation requires a normal curve at every level with some outliers at each end of the distribution, some A's and some D's and, if the admissions department has

made some mistakes, some F’s. The A’s and high B’s who go on to graduate school will almost all also eventually find themselves at the lower end of a new distribution. That’s the reality of life in this world, life under the law, a reality that none of us escapes.

As provost of the university, Jungkuntz represents that reality. As homilist in the chapel, he speaks not as an official of the academic community but on behalf of God and asserts that God has reconciled himself to us not in terms of what others expect of us or even of what we think or wish we were able to do but in terms of who and what we are at this moment. We may be flunking out, unable to get a date, unable to be admitted to graduate school and unable to afford to try to buy our way in, but good enough for God. We are free to do the best we can at this time and in this place and know that although it is not good enough for others and perhaps even not good enough to meet our own standards, we are acceptable to God.

Jungkuntz summarized it all so neatly in that last paragraph. Perhaps too neatly to be unpacked by some students. But I have found my encounter with it an occasion for more intense theological reflection than I expected when I first began this response.

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