

Some Essential “Crossings” Theology in Plain English, Continued. (Part Two of a Keynote Presentation)

Colleagues,

Here is the second part of the paper that launched the 2018 Crossings conference at the end of last month. Two weeks have gone by since I sent you the first part. When introducing that I encouraged you to mull on the coincidence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day on February 14. Love’s day arrived, and hate erupted in Florida leaving 17 of God’s children dead, another staring at a death sentence, and the U.S. writhing anew in the raging, shameful futility of its politics. Of essays addressing this, I’ve seen none more searing than [Fred Niedner’s column in last Sunday’s Chicago Tribune](#). If you haven’t run across it, stop and read it now. The last line is the pithiest, starkest, and most accurate declaration of God’s law in its second use that I’ve ever encountered in a public forum.

That final line also leaves the door wide open for fools of the Pauline variety to rush or tiptoe in with reflections on the Gospel and its power for addressing an episode so bleak, to say nothing of the present bleakness of the land it happened in. Such reflecting was the very thing our conference in January was designed to foment. Where this issue is concerned, I’m still caught in the mulling phase. I would welcome thoughts from any of you, these leading, perhaps, to a forum-style post on the matter in the near future. For now, I simply carry on with rest of my conference presentation. It winds up digging at issues we struggle with in churches, peculiar to our theological and

ecclesiastical commitments. Random slaughter isn't one of them. All too soon it could be, as Fred reminds us. Now is the time for all good saints to think and probe and pray for the mind of Christ.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Lion and the Lamb: God's Underused Gospel for the Weak-Kneed Church; with an Assortment of Introductions

Keynote Address at the Seventh International Crossings Conference (Part Two)

by Jerome Burce

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Where we broke off two weeks ago—

“Peace be with you.” I am (says Jesus) what finally matters to God where you are concerned. Let me also be the one who finally matters to you where each other is concerned. In other words, love one other as I have loved you, and, finding each other in me, dare together to trust that the lion is purring even as you hear it roar. Oh, and while you're at it, don't forget to purr over each other, even when you're feeling cross and cranky with each other.

Or to put all this another way: don't simply hear the Gospel. Use the Gospel.

Continuing today—

And that, more than anything, is what Crossings aims to encourage: a use of the Gospel. In the text study method Lori

walks us through on Wednesday you'll find six steps. The last of these is the one that invites us to imagine how the Gospel, working in us, might erupt in the kind of behavior Jesus had in mind when he talked about letting "your light so shine," your deeds cascading with a goodness that makes others go nuts over God. Much of the ensuing Sermon on the Mount is an exercise in precisely such imagining, as in "Really, the thug ordered you to haul his pack for a mile? So carry it for two, already—and whistle while you trudge!" Shock the guy's sandals off, in other words. When he asks, "What gives?" you can say, "Christ honored you enough to bear your sins; two miles with your pack is the least I can do," or some such thing. That's using the Gospel.

The premise of this conference is that such behavior is in short supply in the America of 2018. So is the attitude—the faith in God—that drives it. And now the greater sorrow: one sees this lack in churches too, if not especially in churches, where one looks first to find it.

I'm looking forward later to reading what you wrote on the posters before I began about the things that trouble you this morning. I won't be at all surprised to see the words "church" and "Christian" cropping up fairly often.

I'm looking forward even more to hearing from our two first-time ever speakers, both new to Crossings. Francisco Herrera is a PhD candidate at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. He spearheads a group called Decolonize Lutheranism. He'll talk about a way he sees the Gospel being underused in the ELCA.

David Zahl is a lay minister at an Episcopal church in Charlottesville, Virginia. He's also the Executive Director of remarkable group called Mockingbird, a band of mad and talented Episcopalians who keep a deft finger on the country's cultural pulse and who also think that Luther was onto something with his

distinction between Law and Gospel. We've asked David to reflect on what he witnessed in his home town last summer when the white supremacists marched in.

I expect much help from Francisco and David with a task that at Crossings we call "tracking." You'll hear that word a lot these next few days from the inside crowd—the groupies, if you will. In tracking one works to identify how issues surfaced in an ancient Biblical text show up today in our own unfolding biographies. You're also asking the deeper, more searing question that any ostrich with a clue is bound to ask, of how the lion is employing this particular text to track us down.

So again our conference text: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith." Two issues pop out immediately. Shame is one. Righteousness, or a lack thereof: that's the other. I expect both these themes to reverberate strongly in whatever it is that Francisco and David put before us.

So too when Steve Turnbull walks us through the text in detail this afternoon. Steve is the senior pastor of a congregation in the Twin Cities that was expelled some years ago from an ELCA synod for the crime of holding a joint membership in LCMC—that's Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ—and having the cheek not to give it up. Seems we all imagine that the lion wants his ostriches to keep things tidy in matters of association, Jews here, Greeks there, separate menus for each lest any be embarrassed. And we call this "righteousness." I don't say this altogether sarcastically. There is much in both Scripture and reason to back it up.

Now whether and how Steve will touch on this I can't begin to say; though Pauline scholar and student of Luther that he is, I

do imagine hearing how Paul is touting another kind of righteousness, one that flies in the teeth of both Scripture and reason, at least in the view of some. That includes the thoughtful, serious folks—agents of the lion, by the way—who got Jesus crucified for being, among other things, a defective Bible believer, this giving rise to his untidy and oh-so unrighteous habit of hanging out with all the wrong people. Paul himself got hounded from town after town for the same reasons. Such things happen when you trust Jesus. Steve, it seems to me, is in good company.

So whether he does so explicitly or not, I half expect to hear Steve accounting for his own shameless behavior as he walks us through the text, calling first and last on Christ crucified to account for him; Christ accounting too for any among us who might wonder why he or she should listen to an exegete from that other not-so-righteous crowd, no stamp of my crowd's approval on him, you know.

Ah, the mess we Christians keep making of the faith we profess. Steve, refresh us in that faith. I'm sure you will.

As will tomorrow's speakers, Kit Kleinhans and Matt Becker, both of them systematic theologians and shady characters in their own right, Kit having wasted most of her life on the wastrel, Martin Luther. That's how much of America would see it, at any rate, academic America certainly, though also a hefty segment of Christian America. A slice of Lutheran America looks officially on Matt as persona non-grata. A few years ago he got the boot from the LCMS for his shameless, unrelenting advocacy of women's ordination; or so it was perceived. As Kit specializes in Luther, so Matt specializes in Elert and Bertram, the two theologians who, more than any other, have channeled Luther for the Crossings community, All three—Bertram, Elert, Luther—channel Paul, who channels Christ. So of Kit and Matt as

well as Steve we ask the following, that they ring the chimes of Gospel at its best as told by Gospel-tellers at their best, helping all of us to sense its power to save us from the enraging, deadly mess of the persons we are, the times we are caught in, to say nothing of the lion we contend with day after day, admit or not, believe it or not. Again, I trust they'll do that.

When they do, the action will pass to the rest of us. You may have noticed already how the schedule sets a lot of time aside for discussion. Evaluations of prior conferences have overflowed with pleas for that. The content of this one demands it. Again, to hear the Gospel is one thing; to use it is another; and employing the Gospel is both a skill and an art, requiring practice. It is also by its very nature a team enterprise. So let the talk around the tables keep circling back to that—how the Gospel can be used, the benefits of Christ employed, their power unleashed through trusting hearts to shatter innate habits of fear and shame and scorn and endless recrimination that keep the seven billion sinners of 2018 at each other's throats and warring against God. This is the muck that lurks behind those things you wrote on the papers over there, not some of them, but all of them.

And let me also, if I may, set this as the overarching goal for our conference: that every person here will go home having thought through the use of the Gospel for at least one issue that friends and dear ones waiting for you there are wrestling with themselves. It may well be they go to church., every Sunday, some of them. They still need to be evangelized, as do we all: ceaselessly, with real-deal Good News that straightens bent knees, and loosens tight throats, and startles some neighbors with the sounds and sights of joy in God.

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And with that, a quick and insufficient contribution to the enterprise at hand, by way of launching it.

My focus is the Church, and in particular that segment of the Church I'm most familiar with and am best equipped to love and critique. Let evangelicals attend to their own house, and may God in his mercy deliver them.

God have mercy too on his American Lutherans. We *are* a weak-kneed lot today, stumbling and confused. Attendance drops. The kids wander off. Synods and districts shrink. Seminaries wither for want of students. Our voice and presence count for all but nothing in the public sphere. Among ourselves we argue, we thrash, we do our own thing. Pastors excel at that. Guilty as charged, says this pastor.

I've mentioned this already, but we can't abide the other Lutheran crowds, the ones tagged with different strings of letters. It's their cultural allegiances that really drive us nuts. We like to say it's their theology. I thought that through 20 years ago in a paper for a DMin class about the LCMS split that led to Seminex. I concluded with some help from Peter Berger that the theology angle was mostly a pious smokescreen for the real contentions, the kind that competitive sinners indulge in as a matter of course. I've encountered nothing since that would change my mind about that.

Congregations are riddled with the same currents. Half the people I preach to voted for Mr. Trump. Some support the NRA. We don't talk about that openly. My own allegiances would dismay them, though I'm pretty sure they guess at them. If announced they'd incite a fight, or some slinking off at the edges—or so I fear. Note that word "fear." It marks a sinner, this sinner, a man who needs to hear and use much better the Christ that he confesses. I'm fairly sure I'm not the only such creature in

this room right now—

Though even as I say this, be sure to notice why I say it, in part to cover my embarrassment by spreading it around. Again, behold the sinner.

And after that, behold the man—or rather, behold the human creature, as Steve taught us two years ago to read that line, the one Pilate declaims when he trots Jesus out to face the mob. There he stands, wearing the sin, the silliness, the shame of this sinner, in this moment. So look at him when you look at me, and insist in turn that I should do the same when I look at you. This Jesus, this Christ, God raised from the dead. It's new age time—all things are ours, including each other; including too each other's shame and folly because we are Christ's who owns it all: and Christ is God's.

Peace be with you, Jesus says. Translation: don't be afraid.

I need to teach and preach and push this a lot more urgently than I 've been doing back in my digs. If only the clowns would listen. (That's the cranky pastor leaking out.) Truth be told, they're not disposed to hear such things, or to believe them when they do. So too with most of Lutheran Christianity. "All things are yours." Are you kidding?

The congregation I serve has its roots in the LCMS, as do I. That means most everyone my age or older passed through a confirmation regimen that required 12-year-olds to demonstrate their worthiness for the body and blood of Christ by memorizing 100 or so Bible verses and great chunks of Luther's catechism. That's how the 12-year-olds heard it, at any rate. "All things are yours" was not in the list of verses we were given to learn, nor even, I think, among the 975 verses laid out in the dreary compendium of doctrine that we thought was the Catechism. I'd have to check to be sure, and I really don't want to.

In any case, I think I'm not surprised that I wasn't taught this verse. I was twelve, after all; and the adults in charge of shaping me as a human being that others can live with had the urgent and pressing task of teaching me that all things were manifestly *not* mine. Not unless I earned them, not unless I deserved them, and no, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's stuff. No college for you unless you do your homework.

Make no mistake: these adults God gave me were serving God as they drove that lesson home. 12-year-old male ostriches are especially pesky. The lion, by no means lacking in mercy, arranges for at least a semblance of order among the birds. He lays down the law. He drives its enforcement. He pushes every bird to clean up its act, to burnish its credentials, and to demonstrate its fitness for the company of other birds. He forces them to preen. Then he turns around and tells them that he hates their preening, using them to pass the message. The withering look directed at folks sprawling in first class by other folks shambling back to coach expresses also God's contempt.

Lutherans as a rule preen quietly. The verse about God hating the proud was absolutely on that list of verses every confirmand must know. Still, preen we do. How else do we attract attention, and bodies in the pews, and checks in the plate? Welcome to real life, so called, in this old and dying age. It demands from everyone, Christians included, a show of righteousness, or a semblance thereof. The building has got to be clean, the organ tuned, the doctrine sound, the deeds worthy. And the more birds you gather together, the more layers of organization you pile on to manage and serve them all, the more rules and principles you need to keep the outfit tidy. Being church you also want those rules and principles to conform with the will of the God who insists on tidiness. Order is God's thing, after all, the gift of gifts he brought to his first creation, and for life in the

old age, it's the sine qua non. To live we must be righteous. If not we die. No wonder we're addicted to strutting our stuff, such as it is.

Christ our Lord was sloppy. Very sloppy. He broke the rules. The defining feature of his ministry, as Elert underscores, was to sit with moral slobs and eat with them. The tidiness crowd was aghast, of course. They always are. That didn't stop Jesus from going to lunch also with Pharisees, and now and then with really, really rich guys. Zaccheus comes to mind.

In the ELCA tidiness means having lunch, or intending to at least, with some sinners, though not all of them. We will never say this explicitly, but really, if you feel thoroughly at home in a county that voted red at the last election, you don't belong here. Our ways are *not* your ways, nor our thoughts your thoughts. Thus saith the Lord where we hang out. Of course, if and when you slap a rainbow sticker on your bumper, we'll be happy to talk. I exaggerate, of course I do, and wildly; but heaven help us, and the clergy in particular, for the truth that's buried there.

LCMC, so far as I know, likes sinners who don't like bishops. Tidiness means dodging that Anglo-Catholic nonsense of the historic episcopate, and perhaps, these days, the moral swamps the ELCA has stumbled into.

Missouri still likes doctrine. Sound doctrine, and the sinners who swallow it all, or say they do. To swallow hard is to be righteous. And no they don't like women in the pulpit, or cads who push for that. As for the gay thing, let's just not go there. As was famously declared at a convention in 1973 in New Orleans, such things and the sinners who suggest them are "not to be tolerated in the church of God."

Question: does Christ not weep over all of us?

One last time: "Peace be with you." And this time, let's try to hear it this way: "Relax." Enough already with this phobia over sin, be it yours or someone else's. That's what I'm here for, Jesus says; and he shows us again his hands and his side.

Here is my proposal to get us started at this conference, and perhaps to stir the pot: we all need to chill on this sin thing, every Lutheran in the land; or rather, we need to trust much better our Lord Jesus Christ—Christ the Lamb, so beloved of the Lion, that all things are ours already, whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the cosmos; life, death, the future, the present, and all the sinners the present holds, whatever their stripe or degree of untidiness.

The first lesson I remember Bob Bertram teaching me—others here remember this too—had to do with a particular interplay between Law and Gospel. No one, he said, can ever really hear the Law unless he or she has first had a strong premonition of Gospel. It's like Harry Potter at the end, when he meets Voldemort in the forest. You can face your death with equanimity, more or less, when you know a resurrection will follow, a truth I've seen again and again over the years in saints I've had to bury.

So too with sin, be it mine or yours. In Christ we can face it, and squarely. I can't escape it. I can't be done with it. I can't avoid the death it's driving me to. A diehard procrastinator (that's me) has no more claim on a place at God's table than a diehard harlot does. Both are called of course to fight their sin for the sake of the people stuck living with them; the Law demands it, whether channeled by a barking cop or a barking spouse; and when they don't, or when they won't, or when they try and try again and finally give up—take me or leave me, they come to whine—then guess what: there is Christ for both of them, inviting both to trust him; and when they do, assuming they do, then in that trust and through that trust, all things

are already theirs, procrastinator or harlot though they still be. "As it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

But try telling that to God's Lutherans these days. Any of them They'll hoot you out of the building, or so I suspect. For sure they want the harlot to quit her harlotry before they stamp her as God-approved. But then, why not demand the same of the procrastinator? Lutherans, lighten up!

Luther himself got it, and better than anyone before or since. I'm a sinner. I can't escape it. I've got Christ. It's time to chill. It might even be time to suck it up and do some bold sinning. That's not exactly what he said in his famous letter to Melanchthon from the Wartburg, but for sure he said it nine years later in a letter to a favorite student, Jerome Weller, who was in a funk, obsessed with his failings. The devil's plaguing you, Luther wrote—here I paraphrase in the broadest strokes—so stick your finger in the devil's eye. Go have a beer. Make merry with your pals. Commit a sin, a real sin. And when the devil comes after you for that, laugh in his face. Tell him you've got Christ. Then tell him to beat it.

They didn't teach us to counsel like this at my seminary.

As for me, here's when I got it and how I got it. You'll recall the ELCA's 2009 assembly, the one that opened the door for gay clergy in committed relationships to serve as pastors. Some months later a parishioner came to see me, a man my age with roots in Missouri too. "I can't commune here anymore," he said. "What the assembly did was sinful, and by communing at an ELCA church I'm sharing in that sin." So I listened, I thought—and I almost blew it. I came this close to lapsing into the tired unwinnable argument over whether gay sex, like straight sex, can sometimes be righteous sex depending on how committed the partnership is; as if anyone has unearthed the golden tablet

that conveys the lion's latest ruling on the matter to that level of specificity.

Anyway, something stopped me at the last half second, I know not what. I said instead to this brother in Christ, "Look. You have never come to communion in this place without sharing in my sin, or I in your sin, or both of us in everyone else's sin. It's not for nothing we call it the common cup. The point is, who else is always there not only sharing that sin but dealing with it for all of us? 'This is *my*body, given for you sinners. Enjoy *my* righteousness.'" "

Anyway, the guy was there the next Sunday, and yes, he communed, and he kept communing there until a job took him to another city.

I commend this to you as a micro-example of how Gospel at its best does indeed have the power to draw and keep people together in angry, fractured times. I wonder what shape the Lutheran churches of America would be in today if, over the past 100 years, Lutherans across the board had focused less on preening for the lion and more on enjoying the lamb; if instead of talking in theory about Christ and his benefits, they had knuckled down with joy and vigor to *use*Christ and his benefits. I wonder what would happen now if a madcap little band of Gospel-trusters were to do precisely that as they fan out to the places they came from? I'm looking at you, of course, realizing as I do that it's way past time for me to quit, however hugely much remains unsaid.

God's best gift ever for the world and the church in 2018 is people like you who hear the Gospel, who trust the Gospel, who respond to the Gospel for the sake of their neighbors and aren't afraid of getting dirty; who wind up shocking the socks off yet another dirty sinner with a down-to-earth dose of God's grace in

Jesus Christ.

I leave it there.

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.