

The Crossings Family Tree: A Third Generation.

Colleagues,

Five years ago today, March 13, 2003 Bob Bertram died. Bob is the father of Crossings, the patriarch. Y'all know that. But now it looks as though he's become a Crossings grandfather. How so? Well, if we designate you folks on the listserve (many of you his actual students) as the "children," there's now evidence that from you is coming a third generation. To remember Bob on this fifth anniversary of his final "crossing," here's evidence that your generation is producing offspring, a third generation of Crossings kids.

Pasted below is a letter recently sent to "Mom," one of Bob's early Crossings students—and a continuing Crossings junkie. "Son" sounds like he's got the same theological DNA, a chip of the old block, a next generation branch of the Crossings family tree. In daily life Son is a US Naval officer. Submarines. When he surfaces from the briny deep and heads for shore, he's on land at a naval base. Nearby is a Lutheran congregation where he shows up for worship. Not long ago he bemoaned to his mom the "Christ-less" sermons coming his way. So she egged him on to do something about it. And he did. Mom passed the correspondence on to me. And now I to you. Proper names are encoded, but the message isn't. See for yourself. Read on.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Mom, below is what I wrote to my Pastor. Thought you might like to read it. Love you and thanks for your help.

LK

Dear Pastor J,

As we chatted after church, I mentioned I'd drop you an email to further our introductions. So, briefly about me: I am native of St. Louis from a family that, despite its Missouri locale, is affiliated with the ELCA. With two Lutheran pastors for grandfathers and their respective wives sharing the same name, I grew up thinking every old man was a minister and every grandma was an old lady named M. Both conclusions I still stand by. After high school I went to the Naval Academy for college where I attended St Mark Lutheran Church in Annapolis, MD. Since graduating, I've moved five times in the last four years so I've become somewhat of a professional church shopper. I moved to this area about two years ago and, after once again finishing my church sampling, am very excited about becoming a part of the St. X community.

You and Pastor T have truly created a church environment welcoming to visitors and thus primed to grow. Each member warmly introduces themselves to new faces they don't recognize, the people are excited about the church, and the music is a refreshing reminder of how great Lutheran music can be (Wednesday's evening prayer was so beautiful I was nearly in tears). It is obvious the St. X's community is well schooled in, and eager about, growth.

And growing it certainly must be doing. It was pretty much standing room only today at second service. When I saw how crowded the church was, I begrudgingly thought it must be Confirmation Sunday and I was thus in for a long one. What other Sunday, other than Christmas and Easter, would make the place so full? A unique and exciting church you have. One thing about the services, however, has troubled me the last couple of

times I've attended. The sermons the past couple of weeks have lacked Christ in such a way that I feel I must risk arrogance and say something about it. Martin Luther wrote the purpose of the sermon is to necessitate Christ. The good news of the gospel, the sweet exchange of condemnation for our sin for Christ's righteousness is such good news that it needs to be shared every week.

When I imagined myself today as a first time visitor to the church, having never heard the gospel, I don't think I would have gotten that message today. In fact, I think the only time Christ was mentioned in the sermon was in reference to his temptations portrayed in a movie. The message I got today was to be a better person, share with others, win and lose with grace, and to ultimately live a better life by following these rules and avoiding certain pitfalls. But, if I can't do it, don't worry about it, "it could be worse."

I understand that we are in Lent, and since this is a time for self-reflection we need to hold off for a while on the resurrection. True, but this time in reflection, and thus concentration on the law, should ultimately lead us to the hopelessness of our situation without Christ. It felt like you were giving a seminar on rules and laws that, if followed, would result in God rewarding us with a fulfilling life in which we find our mission.

But doing this is simply impossible. We can't live up to God. The Law is tough. It's harsh. It's just. And it's impossible to fulfill. If we try to live up to it, we'll find ourselves hating ourselves, and God, much like Luther did before his great revelation. This is the point of Lent. Honest self-reflection that screams the need for a savior. We should be dying for Easter to come and rejoicing in the knowledge that it will.

Today, I got some good advice for living a better life with, or without, Christ our Savior. The good news of Christianity is that Christ frees us from the law. We no longer have to worry about trying to make God, or ourselves, happy by avoiding hazards to our mission. Instead, we may rejoice in the righteousness Christ gives to us. This is good news. This is why being a Christian is the only true way to find happiness. This needs to be shared. This needs to be repeated.

And so I write hoping not to criticize, but to share what has saddened me recently. I look forward to getting to know you better, to your response, and to continuing to enjoy the loving atmosphere of St. X's you and Pastor T have so expertly built.

*Warmly Yours,
LK*

[Pastor J responded. LK passed that response on to Mom, and she to ES, and now ES to you. Do you think Pastor J heard what LK was saying? Is he in synch with the Augsburg Aha?]

LK,

Thanks for writing and giving me your feedback on my sermon today. I always appreciate feedback and look forward to getting to know you better in the days ahead.

I try to give a response to your comments and hope we can talk about this face-to-face in the near future. For Lent this year we are using the Ortberg [Ed: Google that name to learn more] to spur discussion on lifestyle and priorities we have. Since you were there on Wednesday night and heard my homily you know where my heart is, to bring Christ to those who have not heard or accepted him as Lord and Christ. I often say we are dealing with the eternal destiny of people and nothing can be more important. The law always drives us to our knees in the

recognition we need a Savior and the Gospel brings us the Good News that that Savior is Jesus who died and rose for us.

I do not feel that every sermon needs to make that point directly. Sermons can also address how we live our Christian life. God has created us for a purpose and the first purpose is that we were created for worship. We recite the Creed every week which proclaims our faith and the role of Jesus. The sermon tries to explain the Scripture lessons for the week both historically and how they apply to our lives today. I do not believe that everything depends on the sermon for that message to be heard. The hymns and songs we sing, the liturgy and the prayers all are part of the worship experience and, I believe, are used by the Holy Spirit to drive us to our knees and raise us up through the Gospel.

Before coming to St X, I was a chaplain in an institutional context. One of the reasons I left that chaplaincy was hinted at last week when I talked about living lives of integrity. I was not free to proclaim Christ in the way I wanted and felt I needed to return to the parish where I could proclaim "Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again!"

I really appreciate your comments and will take them to heart as I prepare sermons in the future. Palm Sunday we hear the entire Passion story which is the heart of the New Testament. I hope you will be able attend Holy Week services as I think you will hear the power of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection as Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life and no one comes to the Father except through him.

LK, thanks for writing. I would love to find a time when we could have lunch together or just visit some to get to know each other better. What is your schedule like and when are you usually free?

Hope to see you Wednesday if you are free. Perhaps we can find a time then to get together.

*In Christ,
Pastor J*

[This exchange brings to mind a line that Bob Bertram regularly hyped from Apology 4 of the Augsburg Confession. In speaking to the critics who faulted the Augsburgers for being “soft” on ethics and good works because of their constant drumbeat of “faith alone,” Melanchthon’s rejoinder (paragraph 188) is that our pastors and teachers do indeed praise good works, but in a very specific way: “They praise good works in such a way as not to lose the Gospel’s free promise.” Question: Does Pastor J’s response do likewise? ES]