The Easter Life in Practice (An Example)

Co-missioners,

Apologies. We're putting the cart before the horse this week. The horse is a little set of gospel gems that one of us has been gleaning from the Johannine texts of the current Easter season. The cart is an example of how it might it look when you start investing such treasure in the everyday life of the church.

It's an old cart, admittedly. Bob Bertram cobbled it together thirty years ago using a pattern he got from St. Paul. Then he hauled it out at an assembly of the ELCA's Central States Synod—the Missouri-Kansas synod, as he named it at the time. This was in June 1991, a few months after an ELCA task force first saw fit to float an argument for blessing gay and lesbian unions. Sparks were flying throughout the church body that summer. They were surely popping at the assembly Bob was addressing. We think it a safe bet that he meant here to quench them, or at least to take his best gospel-telling shot at cooling temperatures in the room.

All this gives the piece a dated feel; though if any should wonder about its current relevance, then check your reaction when the term "homosexual" pops up. It was still in use then as a matter of course. Today it offends widely. As all such language does, it also invites the offended to abhor the offender as one whose voice merits no further hearing. If such should be your reaction to Bob—looking at you, younger readers—then pause to notice how he's managed to snag you. Suddenly his core argument is as pertinent as it could be, the question being, where do you stand in your relationship to him

as the brother in the Lord he still is these days, however deep the sleep he's caught in?

For our part, we think Bob gives us a splendid example of how the Easter life we've been hearing about in recent weeks can be seen and known today. More on that next week.

By the way, what we're sharing here is only Part One of a two-part address. You'll find the rest of it in the Bertram corner of our library under the title "Abounding in Hope."

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

The Easter Life in Practice (An Example)

by Robert W. Bertram



(lifted and renamed from a convention presentation of June 7-8, 1991,

entitled "Abounding in Hope")

Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

I.

There is a seminary professor I know, a fine preacher, who used to tell a powerful story. Used to. His story illustrated the lengths to which Christ went in our behalf. The trouble was, in order for the story to make its point it had to use language which some people might find shocking. Few preachers could tell that story and get away with it. I do know of one other preacher who tried, but with tragic results. She was one of the professor's students, a young seminarian on her internship. The preaching occasion on which she tried telling her professor's story turned out to be so traumatic for her that she almost quit her pastoral calling. As she later told me in tears, her sermon not only fell flat, it came off as tacky, even offensive. One of the elders tried consoling her with Mark Twain's famous line, "Ma'am, you had all the right words but not the right music."

The intern herself had a better diagnosis of what went wrong. "My prof could tell the story," she said, "because he believed in it. I was telling it just for effect. He could use the expression 'go to hell' with a clear conscience but when I said that I didn't feel right about it." Now I happen to know from that professor that, since that time, he has never used the story again except under the most guarded circumstances. That is a loss. But he did that for a greater gain.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans he was

addressing a similar situation. In the congregation at Rome there were some Christians, perhaps Jewish ones, who for religious reasons did not feel right about eating the same strong meat and drinking the same strong drink (like using the same strong language) as the world did. Also they felt that certain holy days deserved special respect. By contrast there were others in the congregation, perhaps Gentiles, who so enjoyed their new freedom in the gospel that they ate and drink without such restrictions and treated each day of the week as freely as the next.

Was the difference between the two lifestyles serious? Paul did not think so. At any rate, that was not the problem. Something else was. Meanwhile Paul put the best construction on both groups. Both of them in their own way, he said, behaved as they did "in honor of the Lord." (14:6) The one lifestyle, which emphasized restraint, dramatizes one important feature of our Lord, how he calls us to die to the world. The other group's lifestyle complements that with our Lord's corollary stress on resurrection and fullness of life. So if it's living we do, we do that to the Lord, and if it's dying we do, we also do that to the Lord. For the Lord is lord of both, of dying and of living. (14:8-9)

Well, then, if this honest difference between two Christian lifestyles was not the problem, what was? It was that the difference between them was being squelched, squelched by the stronger of the two groups and to the hurt of the weaker: to the hurt not just of the weaker ones' pride or of their ethnic traditions but to the hurt of their faith. The weaker ones in this case, those whose faith was not so strong, were the stricter of the two groups. We might call them the conservatives if we promise not to think ill of them because of that. Evidently within the Roman congregation, being conservative was no longer "in," no longer the dominant style. Instead these

weaker members, so-called, were being pressured ever so subtly to comply with the other group's freer lifestyle even though inwardly they could not honestly feel right about doing so. Nor could they believe that God felt right about it. They found themselves having to go along with, possibly even voting for, a kind of behavior which, so they believed, displeased God.

And they were correct, says Paul. If that is what they believed, then they did indeed—*they* did! — displease God. "Happy is the person," says Paul, "who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. But he who has doubts is condemned, if *he* eats, because *he* is not acting out of faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." (14:22-23) It is like the young intern I described, forcing into her sermon the loaded expression "go to hell" merely because that had worked elsewhere, though she herself, as she said so well, did not "feel right" about it. And because she did not "feel right" about it, that is exactly what she was; not "right," not a "right" person for doing that. Perhaps her professor's provocative expression still struck her as profane or as crude or as macho or as just not "her." Whatever, Paul would agree, if what she did she did "without faith," then what she did was "sin." How sensitive of her to perceive that. No wonder she is today such a superb pastor.



That reminds me of Martin Luther King, Jr., who as a good Baptist preacher knew his Bible and followed Paul's example in his own dealings with the "weak" and the "strong." Dr. King and other staff members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference used to spend hours getting people ready, spiritually ready, before they went out on the streets for their non-violent demonstrations. These were not just locker-room pep talks to get the marchers pumped up. By no means. It was a strenuous process of self-examination. It was called "purification:" Can you go out there and endure taunts and stone-throwing and being spit upon without striking back? Can you be hated and not hate in return? Can you stand to be cursed and still respond with good cheer and say to the cursers, "Peace, brother," "Peace, sister?" That was not everyone's cup of tea. There were dedicated, well-meaning activists who wanted fiercely to join the demonstrations but who could not qualify under that stringent criterion of The Sermon on the Mount.

They failed the test not just because they were too angry or lacking in self-control. That might have been part of it. But basically these were folks who were still too deeply scarred inside by what the black spirituals called "nobodyness," a haunting sense of their own worthlessness instilled in them by centuries of white indignities. They had not yet been liberated enough by that opposite freedom which the gospel of Jesus

brings, what Dr. King called the gospel of “somebodyness.”

Consequently, they were not yet strong enough to go out and shoulder the cross of hatred, feeling right about that or as Paul would say, doing it “in faith.” They were not all that convinced that such cross-bearing, apparently so passive and slavish, could be pleasing to God. So, for them, it would not be God-pleasing; for them it would be sin. In their case, therefore, Dr. King would find something else for them to do, something they could do in good faith, like helping to get out the mailings. King appreciated the biblical insight, “Whatever is done without faith is sin.” And he cared too much for his friends’ faith to overburden it further.

II.

But now notice something from this example, also from Paul’s example with the Romans. These “weak ones,” as they were called by “the strong,” were not the ones on whom Paul laid the burden of responsibility. No, the burden was on “the strong.” Paul concentrates his attention not on those whose faith is too weak to live the bolder lifestyle. Rather he concentrates on the others, those who can live such a bold life with good conscience, with strong faith.

For that of course, for their strong faith, Paul does not fault them. But he does fault them for something else. Whether they mean to or not, these strong ones, so-called, are browbeating or one-upping or shaming the weaker ones into conformity with themselves. It is the free spirits in the congregation, those among whom Paul includes himself (15:1), the meat-eaters and wine- drinkers and sabbath-skippers and seminary professors whom Paul singles out for correction. They are not as strong as they may think, not if they insist on what they by themselves have a right to—on what “pleases ourselves,” as Paul says (15:1)—yet in

the process cause sisters and brothers to stumble.

As for myself, Paul says, “I know and I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your [sister or] brother is being hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.” (14:14-15) A little later Paul adds, “Everything is indeed clean [kosher] but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what they eat” (14:20) or drink or by how freely they observe the sabbath or by the colorful language they use with their seminarians. I think that is why the professor stopped telling his favorite story, priceless gospel though it was, so long as it set a precedent his students could not emulate in good faith.

III.

If the strong faith that you have overtaxes the weaker faith of the others, then, says Paul, “the faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.” (14:22) What! But then, dear Paul, comes back the objection from the strong, if I do take what is my Christian right and keep it strictly to myself and God and away from the weaklings, am I not limiting my Christian freedom? Well, now, says Paul, is that all it is, limiting? Isn’t it also a way of *enlarging* your freedom? So free are you in Christ that you are free even to conceal your freedom from those who might be weakened by it. But in that case, the objector replies, I would not be coming out of the closet with who I really am. I would be one person privately before God and I would pretend to be somebody else before my weak neighbors.

Oh, says Paul, I rather suspect that your weak neighbors, as we call them, already have a pretty good hunch about how strongly you believe and the lifestyle you enjoy; they do prefer that you

not make an issue of it. All I was asking is that you spare them the miserable conflict of having to give approval, even tacit approval, to something they cannot truly justify. That puts them in conflict with God. Spare them that, please. You probably could extort their outward approval by means of your superior arguments or by making them appear bigoted. I am asking you not to flaunt your freedom if in the process you undo the painstaking handiwork of the Holy Spirit, your neighbor's faith. (14:20) Instead, why not show how strong you really are in this case by keeping your strong faith to yourself, yourself and God?

It must have been something like that that motivated Martin Luther, one winter, to keep his faith to himself and God. It was the winter of 1530-1531. At that moment his whole Reformation appeared to be doomed. His opponents, the pope and the emperor, were mobilizing their military forces on the border, preparing to invade and to wipe out the reform movement with the sword once and for all. On this side of the border were the German people who had experienced the new liberation of the gospel in their lands. Though they were no match for the emperor's superior forces, they and their princes were determined to resist the impending invasion, to the death if necessary.

Luther, too, knew that resistance of some kind was inevitable, but his strong personal conviction was that the resistance should be non-violent. What was strong about his conviction was that he trusted that God could somehow use even such non-violent resistance to protect the people and their gospel. The people, however, and their civil government did not share Luther's strong faith. They were, shall I say, more conservative. By contrast with Luther they believed they would have to defend themselves by force. In the language of Paul's Epistle to the Romans they were "the weak," I suppose, and Luther was more like "the strong."

But following Paul's advice, Luther finally decided to keep his own bolder options to himself—himself and God—though he would not have had to do that had there been only himself to consider. Knowing Luther you can imagine how hard that was for him to bite his tongue and keep mum about his convictions. Still, that is what he did. This time, he said, I will put my pen back in its sheath—I will turn off my computer—and I shall not impose my own position upon the church even though I believe it to be truer to the gospel.

And why will he remain silent? Because when the invasion comes and the people will have to resist one way or the other, it is all important that they be able to do their resisting with good consciences, without constantly second-guessing themselves and wondering whether they shouldn't have listened to Luther instead. In short, they should not be made to act against their own belief that what they are doing pleases God. For Paul was right, "Whatever is done without faith is sin." And Martin Luther, like his famous descendant, Martin Luther King, Jr., had no wish to weaken his oppressed people's faith even farther.

This does place a strain upon the strong ones, what with their wonderfully free faith and yet having to keep their freedom from public view out of consideration for others. I can imagine a bishop, for instance, who after a hectic couple of weeks on the road decides to skip church just this one Sunday morning and celebrates his freedom in Christ by slipping out and playing golf. But then what happens, once he gets out there, is that he shoots a hole-in-one. Consider his dilemma: whom can he tell? If he did tell, not only would he give himself away. What is worse, he may tempt others to follow his example but, in their case, with guilty consciences. So what does he do? Being truly strong, he does what Paul advises, keeps his strong faith to himself and God, though I'm sure, knowing golfers, that does not come easily.

IV.

May I tell you about another case in point, this one more delicate? There are these two middle-aged men, musicians, who have been living together for several years now. In the Christian congregation to which they belong nothing is ever said about their being gay, either by the men themselves or by their fellow-parishioners. Officially and publicly the question does not come up. It is not that the parishioners don't have their own private theories about the situation. They do. However, because the two men are such great favorites within the congregation everyone, the men included, would prefer to keep it that way and let well enough alone. As a result, no one really knows for sure whether the two men are in fact practicing homosexuals.



The congregation, I am told, is just as happy not knowing that. That way, the parishioners, who love these two brothers in Christ, don't have to pretend to love their way of life, since they honestly don't know what it is. True, this particular congregation, traditionalist though it is, probably could be intimidated into pretending to accept the two men as gays if it came down to doing that rather than losing them. But as it is, the congregation is spared such a schizophrenic decision. And why? Because the two men do not insist, "Love us, love our lifestyle"—a lifestyle which, blessedly, remains an unknown. Not even the priest knows. Or if he knows, he is not telling.

However, two or three years ago that tacit agreement, for such it is, threatened to come apart. That was when the present

priest arrived on the scene. Quickly he came to know and like these two musicians and, almost as quickly, jumped to his own conclusion that they must be living in a sexual union. Because he meant well and wanted everything to be open and above board, he hatched a plan for them—the priest did—although his wife tried to discourage him from that. He was going to urge the men to come forward with their secret. He would assure them of his own backing, to the point of urging the congregation to endorse their union, maybe even solemnizing it with a nuptial ceremony.

The marvel is that it was the two men themselves who, sensing what the new priest was up to, thanked him but very firmly talked him out of his plan. If they actually did have a secret, said they, they would rather have it kept that way, a secret. Even if it were a secret which everybody knew, better that it should be known by everyone as just that, as a secret. (That is, if there really was a secret in the first place.) For then nobody has to stand up and say yes to something he or she cannot honestly justify. That, said they—namely, standing up and saying yes—is the sort of thing you do only if "you can look God straight in the eye." "Only if you can look God straight in the eye": isn't that like what Paul was saying, Only if you can do it with faith? And if you cannot do it with faith, it is sin. So, why foist something on people against their faith?

Anyway, said the two men to the priest, didn't the congregation already have a precedent for this sort of secret-keeping? Isn't there Mrs. So-and-so, a widow, who had inherited a large fortune, about which everybody knows yet about which everybody also respects her desire to keep the information private? As the priest told me, he was utterly persuaded by the case the men made. What's more, good sport that he is, he thanked them for the theology they had taught him.

As you might expect, word about their conversation with the

priest must have leaked out. For not long after, the widow whom I mentioned, one of the most conservative members of the parish, came and thanked the two men. She did that ever so discreetly. She simply thanked them for having been so helpful to the new priest. Then she handed them a sizable donation for the church organ, which they were rebuilding. They reciprocated by having her over for supper. Then she had them over in return. And so on. This has given the congregation more than enough to talk about, not at all maliciously but affectionately and beaming from ear to ear.

You understand of course, the story is not about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality but about something at least as important, how strong believers can restrain their own freedom, keeping it to themselves and God if that gives others "all peace and joy in believing."

V.

That, sisters and brothers, is what our verse from Paul's Epistle to the Romans is about, though you might never have guessed that looking simply at this single verse, Romans 15:13. For publicity purposes we have had to abbreviate it even more drastically into a short convention slogan, showing only the verse's last three words, "abounding in hope." But what Paul means by "abounding" is that our hope should exceed our own selfish bounds. Hope should not be bounded, limited to merely what "pleases ourselves." The Jerusalem Bible translates the phrase, not "abounding in hope" but rather "that the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope." And few things so bind and constrict the hope of the Christian community as when believers, especially strong believers, flaunt their right to live as they choose in disregard of others whose faith is less bold than theirs. That puts the weaker believers in a bind, a bind actually with God.

On the other hand, it is possible to be so strong in your faith that you can accommodate yourself to the more fragile, brittle faith of others for their own new peace and joy. That, says Paul, is being like Christ our Lord. For he gamely consented to be, of all things, a Jew, a member of that strict, law-conscious people, “the circumcised.” Now that takes a mighty big God, to rein in his boundless freedom over all creation and downscale it to such human, conservative, legal proportions as those of Israel. Yet wasn’t that exactly how this free-wheeling rabbi Jesus sprang loose God’s mercy way beyond Israel, by first of all respecting and adapting to Israel’s legalities? Just look at what all resulted from his humble keeping of that law. The promises to his ancestors, once these promises were finally kept in Jesus the Jew, no longer had to be kept within the rigorous boundaries of Judaism. Now those promises could spread out to other ethnic groups, to such lawless riffraff as the pagan Germans and Scandinavians and Africans and Hispanics and Asians, the likes of you and me. (15:3-12)

And now for the likes of us, in turn, to become the likes of Christ to other weaker believers than ourselves is being “strong” indeed. Isn’t that like what we used to call isometric exercise, increasing your strength by restraining your strength—in this case, increasing your strength for others by restraining your strength for yourselves? That is being super-strong, Paul would say, with the “strength of [Christ’s own] Holying Spirit.” This side of the resurrection, you cannot get much stronger than that.