

The Eastering of Robert W. Bertram

Colleagues,

Bob Bertram was born on Easter Day in 1921. Easter was early that year, March 27. An Easter egg hatchling, right from scratch. He never got over it. Therefore it was no surprise that Easter was the cantus firmus of our liturgy in his memory on March 22. Yes, he'd given instructions. And in those instructions Easter was all hooked to Bob's baptism, the same way St. Paul does it in Romans 6. Bob died on March 13, two weeks short of his 82nd birthday, five weeks short of Easter this year. Some of us wondered in those final days—sotto voce, of course—whether he'd bring it full circle to this year's Easter on April 20. He was that kind of guy. He didn't stand on ceremony, but if ceremony was possible, he'd go for it. One of his favorite German proverbs was; "Wenn schon, denn schon." Colloquially translated: "If you can finesse it, do it!"

Bob "played" with Easter in his theologizing. Even made a verb out of the noun. God Eastered Christ after three days. Christ Easters us with his sweep swap. And then that verb in the form of participle and gerund [do kids even learn those terms anymore?] into "Eastering." So the full range of the Gospel is our Eastering—from cradle (a.k.a. baptism) to the grave—and then beyond. See how Bob talked "Eastering" in the item below about "death-period" and "death-comma."

Another prominent parallel in Bob's verb-crafting came from the word "holy," as in Holy Spirit. That Spirit is the HolyING Spirit. And in Bob's lexicon the Holying Spirit was the Healing Spirit.

Well, that memorial service here in St. Louis was high and holying hoopla from beginning to end. Eastering too. A week later at Valparaiso University in Indiana there was another one. What follows are two artifacts, one from each of the two liturgies. Shorter one is mine from the service here in town. Longer piece is Fred Niedner's sermon at the Valparaiso celebration. In between some cyber-info for seeing visuals of the St. Louis event.

Peace & Joy! Blessed Eastering!
Ed Schroeder.

RWB REQUIEM

**(E.Schroeder's encomium at the Memorial Liturgy,
March 22, 2003)**

At Luther's funeral, Philip Melanchthon was the preacher. His most poignant words were: "Most of all I thank God for Martin Luther because he taught me the Gospel."

Bob Bertram taught me the Gospel. Many of you here are saying the same. For me it started 55 years ago—I was 18—when he was my teacher at Valparaiso University. Bob was in the philosophy department, but that's where theology was being done. Valpo's mad genius president O P Kretzmann had hired Bob—along with other young hotshots like Jaroslav Pelikan, Dick Luecke (also in the philosophy dept.)—to put meat on the bones of the University's vision: to join Athens and Jerusalem. "High academic scholarship and high religion," as OP liked to call it. But the blueprint was fuzzy. So the hotshots were called in to work it out.

After Pelikan and Luecke moved to other callings, Bob stayed on (a total of 15 years) to work out the blueprint. He pulled it straight from the theology of the Lutheran Reformation, actually straight from the Lutheran Confessions, the focus of his doctoral work at the University of Chicago. The blueprint was actually simple. For reading the Bible it is the Law/Gospel lenses. For reading the world and for acting in the world it's the same lenses: God's Law at work to care for that world and critique it, and then God's Gospel promise to redeem it. For the last 30 years he called it Crossings.

After Bob was my college teacher in the 1940s, I later joined him as teaching colleague at Valpo. We worked on the blueprint together, and as he sometimes said, we've been "joined at the hip" ever since. At Concordia Seminary, at Seminex, and in the Crossings Community he founded.

Bob had thousands of students during his years of teaching. And surprising as it may sound, that number increases even though he has died. Bob's theological paradigm has a website. Law/promise theology as we learned it from Bob gets posted each week on the Crossings website. The response grows and grows. It's now 1200 "hits" each day. That's almost one per minute. Last year 59,000 different folks (from well over 100 diff. countries) visited the website to check out law/promise theology.

Bob and I were buddies. That's his word. Andy Weyermann said we were like the Lone Ranger and Tonto. [Later I learned what 'tonto' really meant, namely, simple-minded] Even so. Bob could talk the language of the Univ. of Chicago and do law/promise theology with the eggheads, and Farmboy Ed could do likewise with the students not quite so gifted. It was a strange and wonderful relationship. [You can guess which adjective applied to which one of us.]

The Lone Ranger image is a good one. For Bob was also a “masked man,” even to this buddy. There was more going on inside than he ever let me see. How many times did a conversation end with him saying: “I’ll have to tell you about that some time.” But such times never came—even as we spent lots of time together at his bedside. But one thing I did hear at his bedside that I’d never heard before was: “Eddy, the FUN we had—at Valpo, at Seminex, in Crossings. Count it all joy. Thank you Jesus.”

Like the Lone Ranger, Bob also used silver bullets, colloquial expressions for the specs of Law/Gospel (a.k.a. Law/Promise) theology. The besetting sin of us “good folks,” was the “Pharisee heresy.” Christ’s work on the cross, what Luther called the “froehlicher Wechsel” became God’s “sweet swap” with sinners. When Law and Gospel contended, the Gospel finally “trumped” the Law. [See the 8-foot banner over there carried in many a Seminex procession. It boldly proclaims: “We shall rise OUR LORD to meet, treading DEATH beneath our feet.” The word DEATH on the dragon underfoot of the three euphoric rejoicers (one of the three with black, one with red, and one with a white—well pink—face) is in silver—that’s powerful—but OUR LORD with hands widespread above these three is in gold. Gold trumps silver.]

One of the silver bullets was his “folksy” retelling of the Gospel for this past Sunday, Reminiscere. The Sunday in Lent to remember how God remembers us —“in gold.” That Gospel text speaks about trying to save your life and still losing it vs. losing your life for Christ’s sake, and then gaining it all back again. In the Bertram version, “Life is not win/lose. Nor is it win/win, says Jesus. It’s lose/lose. But there are two different ways to lose! One is hanging onto your life like this [arms clutched around self] and that is Lose-PERIOD! The other is giving your life away [hands extended palms open] connected to Christ. You still lose your life, but this losing is Lose-

COMMA. And there is another clause coming.”

Today we mark God’s COMMA to the life of blessed Bob. The rest of the sentence of Bob’s life story is on the banner.

The Gospel is in that comma. Bob taught me the Gospel.

One of Bob’s Crossings’ students, Sherman Lee, offers this:
For photos from the RWB Memorial liturgy, please go to:

<http://homepage.mac.com/sherman42/Crossings/>

- The password is “peacejoy”
 - Please also note the other Crossings-related photo albums.
 - SEE ESP. two photos of The Banner (described in Ed’s encomium above) in the photo collection “Richard Lyon Memorial” at the same website.
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Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso, Indiana
28 March 2003

“Wherever we went, he always got there first.”
in memoriam, Robert W. Bertram, 1921-2003

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not

know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." John 14:1-7

It was Bob Bertram's own idea that we should have this service. Through Michael Hoy, former colleague and now friend in St. Louis, the request came already last summer. Bob still felt connected enough to this place and this community that he wished to be remembered here in this way—as though we might forget! The service we're doing is modeled on the one conducted on Saturday in St. Louis. The cover of the service folder bore the title: "Thanks Eternally." (That was the closing to a note Bob wrote to his pastor concerning the shape of the memorial service and the homily to be preached as part of it.) Some of you were there, and you heard—even spoke—some of the words of thanks and commemoration offered there on Saturday. We've now woven some of our own stories into the mix of those we gather up as a way of giving thanks today for Bob's life and for what he gave to each of us, and to all of us together. With our hands upraised we join in thanks as we hand our brother Robert back to the one who gave him to us.

Plenty of stories got shared in that St. Louis service. Ed Schroeder, also a teacher and colleague to some of us here, remembered almost a lifetime of connections with Bob. As David Truemper said today about Melanchthon and Luther, and himself and Bob, so also did Ed describe Bob first of all as the person who taught him, Missouri biblicist that he was, the gospel. That was here, at Valpo, in the late 1940's. They went on to have a relationship something like that of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Ed said.

John Tietjen, president of the St. Louis seminary and later of

Seminex, remembered Bob as a poet of theology and a theologian of poetry, a man of words, imagination, and letters who did his writing on the canvass of our hearts—and always in the shape of the cross.

Bob's pastor and friend, Arden Mead, preached the sermon. He, too, told stories, including some from the difficult, tumultuous days of the great Missouri war of the 1970's. He began and ended, however, by saying that the most important thing he could think to say about Bob Bertram was that Jesus Christ loved Bob enough to give his life for him. And the second most important thing was that Bob never got over it. He closed by saying he guessed he never would. Get over it, that is.

And there were stories from Bob's children, all of them. Bob was a husband and dad, too, and a brother. That by itself was amazing to some of us. Given all he did that we knew about, how in the world did he also have time for a personal life?

I'm to preach, not tell stories, but I searched my synapses for a memory of Bob that would go with the gospel lesson he chose for his memorial service. I found one personal anecdote. At the beginning of my time as a student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Bob was filling in for a short-handed department of historical theology. Thus, my first experience of Bob as a teacher came in a second-year course in Reformation history. At his direction, we conducted medieval-style disputations on historical and theological questions. We marveled at this teacher who spoke so easily and eloquently and in such detail, without reading from notes, and constructed long, complex sentences that strung together all manner of dependent clauses without ever getting lost in them, nor did he ever say, "uh. . ."

But something from the first day of that long-ago term remains the vivid memory that links with these lessons. When giving us the usual course details, assignments, syllabus, and book list, Bob told us, almost in passing it seemed at first, "My attendance policy is simple. If you are prepared, you may come." We thought this unusual, even a bit curious, but didn't give it a lot of thought until some weeks later on a day when class discussion lagged, and Bob called on a few students by name. "Mr. Tetlinger, what does Luther say about this?" There was no response. Bob asked, "Are you prepared?" When the answer was negative, Bob gestured toward the door, and with a sweep of his other hand invited all other malefactors present to find their way to the same exit. A silent, embarrassed recessional ensued. And in the next class period we had very lively discussion.

If you are prepared, you may come. When I came to Valpo to teach, thanks to Bob, by the way, at least in part, I imitated not only his sentence structures as best I could, and the practice of medieval disputations in a Lutheran Confessions class, but I bravely used his attendance policy. "If you are prepared, you may come." I quickly learned that college students in the '70's were different from seminarians. They thought this was great, and loved to be dismissed.

"If you are prepared, you may come." I almost chose that as my title today. The policy still sticks with me, because among other things, it strikes me as an entrée to the gospel lesson, those words from Jesus' farewell discourses with the disciples. "I go to prepare a place for you," Jesus said.

But I couldn't use that line all by itself, if nothing else because I had the strong sense that Bob was looking over my shoulder as I prepared, and that attendance policy is law. It does not by itself hold a sermon. It is conditional. So we must

add another line, another story. It seems to me just the right one came from Bob and Thelda's son John Bertram at the memorial service last Saturday. He's here today, by the way, and could, if necessary, correct my memory of his words. John told us all the story of his family's relationship with Aloisius, a character in a famous, old German story, "Ein Münchener im Himmel." In that story, Aloisius, ein Münchener, caused much disruption when he arrived in heaven. He wanted things the way he wanted them, and one thing he wanted was to drink beer at the times he was accustomed.

It seems that the Bertram family gave the name Aloisius to the new Volkswagen bus they purchased for transportation during a sojourn in Germany. John told about travels and adventures of the Bertram family and Aloisius, and one image from his tribute stuck with me. He recalled that his dad always drove the Volkswagen bus, which meant Bob was seated up against the glass up at the flat front of that vehicle that seemed so long and so large to the children. "This meant," John noted, "that wherever we went, he always got there first."

And I thought, "Yes. That's my picture of Bob, too." Wherever we went, he always got there first. As my teacher, later as a colleague at Seminex, and throughout my adult life as a friend, yet always, still, his student—wherever we went, he always got there first.

Those of us who studied with Bob all learned some phrases, some habits of language, and certain theological methods that go with them. Ed Schroeder, Tonto, calls them "silver bullets," like the "Pharisee heresy," or the "sweet swap" that God in Christ makes with sinners. Bob's students, myself included, also inherited the language of diagnosis and prognosis. We learned to peel back the layers of our diseases, probing the depths of the damage apparent in our human condition, until we

came at last face to face not only with symptoms, but with our idolatries, vanity, and our utter hopelessness. And never, as we learned these things, did it ever seem that Bob the teacher merely said, "You must go there, to those depths of diagnosis and confession, if you would be a theologian, or even a Christian." No, we knew that wherever we went, he'd been there first.

And it became apparent to us, too, that we could dig down like that, deep into the muck of diagnosis, almost fearlessly, because we knew that beyond diagnosis lay prognosis. Promise. Bad as the diagnosis was, we would always find Jesus Christ, surprisingly enough, right there with us, pinned with the same diagnosis, "made to be sin who knew no sin." But that amazing discovery meant that we got to share his prognosis, too, which always proved hopeful—indeed, glorious! The gospel's prognosis made us free. Free enough, among other things, to persist in the fearless and radical discipline of diagnosing the layers of illness in ourselves and in our world. In the joy of that freedom, rejoicing with this prognosis in hand, we also could see that these weren't merely words and method, but that Bob lived this prognosis. Indeed, it was his life. Wherever we went, he always got there first.

"I go to prepare a place for you," Jesus told the disciples. In this scene of John's gospel, that statement confused the disciples somewhat. They didn't know what place Jesus meant, or where he was going.

We think we know—he's going to his Father's house, to the heavenly mansions, to get our "rooms" ready. But that's not quite what John's gospel proclaims, for such a theology would skip the cross and go straight to glory. It would offer prognosis without diagnosis. No, after this promise that Jesus will prepare a place for us, John's gospel takes pains to tell

of several places Jesus would go quite deliberately before he ever took leave for the heavenly mansions. First, after supper, there would be the place that Judas knew, the place where Jesus would find himself betrayed and arrested. Jesus would go there because that place would require some preparation, for disciples, ancient and modern, always end up there, too. He must ready it for us.

Next came the place called Golgatha, and finally the place where they laid his body, in a new tomb where no one else had lain. Jesus went there. We will end up there also, as Bob now has, thanks to the cancer that betrayed his body, assaulted his brain, and nailed him to a hospice bed. Those same places await us. But they are ready for us now, prepared for all of us, and Christ awaits us there. There is no place any one of us can go but that even there Jesus Christ is Lord for us, and we land even there in his company.

Wherever we travel, he's always got there first. And in his embrace, we experience the sweet swap, we share his prognosis. A place is prepared for us. This message with all its layers and depth and riches we learn from our teachers, our parents, the ones like Bob who go before us. The gift itself comes from The Teacher, the crucified and risen one.

If you are prepared, you may come. Thankfully, the preparation has been done already in our baptism. And the Teacher himself completes and perfects the preparation. We live, therefore, with this promise: All is prepared. You will come. For wherever we go, he always got there first.

Thanks, eternally.

Frederick A. Niedner

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