

The “Heart Disease” of Self-Referential Faith

Colleagues,

I was planning to write today’s offering, but time ran out. Look for it next week, when I’m going to raise a question or two about whether pastors and churches are well-advised to tout the classic disciplines of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving as the thing for folks to concentrate on during Lent. I think not, at least not in the way I hear them being touted these days. I also think that Robert Kolb laid out a superb case over the past two Thursdays for being chary of them. But more on that, as I say, next week.

For now we send you something better, a reflection by an ELCA bishop on the sort of thing that does demand our attention in Lent, indeed, the very thing that the ongoing discipline of God’s Law and God’s Gospel seeks to address. The author is Bishop Martin Wells of the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod. Bishop Wells had been asked to present a paper at January’s Crossings Conference on “The Church Executive as Disciple.” For reasons he explains himself, he wound up inviting four other ELCA bishops to share the assignment with him. Together they put together one of the most compelling hours of the entire event. We’ll pass along some other pieces of that in coming weeks or months. For now, start with Bishop Wells. Those who heard him in person couldn’t help but thank God that he’s a leading pastor of the Church. We suspect you’ll do the same.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editors

Address to the 4th Annual Crossings Conference, January 22-25, 2012

Conference Theme: “The Gospel-Given Life: Discipleship Revisited”

“The Heart-Disease of Self-Referential Faith”

I'm very grateful to Dr. Kuhl for this invitation and still more grateful for the committee's flexibility in shifting from a presentation by one bishop to this panel format. I'm deeply grateful to my partner bishops for stepping into the breach on behalf of the conference.

This change was occasioned by the loss of preparation time last fall as a brother came to live with us—and now it looks like it will be for the whole winter—seeking treatment for a papillary squamous-cell carcinoma, a nasty mouth cancer. We have become my brother's keeper not out of big hearts, but because he had no place else to go and welcoming him was minimally required under the commandment to honor father and mother. Besides, he's a wonderful fellow and he and I have learned to live with the ways we drive one another nuts! The same can't be assumed for a spouse who is asked to open the intimate space of home, particularly when she does her work from home. Thank you to Susan Briehl, my wife.

Please continue to pray and work for those who under the present healthcare system must show up at culture's door and hope to be let in and be cared for. I see how we pay for it now; how much better if we could give all citizens the chance to seek this care with dignity rather than beg for it. Scott is in the last weeks of radiation and chemo and we are hopeful for a full recovery.

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I'm so grateful for the excuse to re-read Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and reflect on his words in our present cultural moment. It is a time of serious and deep transition for much of the human family and the aspect of this transition that is most interesting to me is the call to enter the globalized context and in some way move beyond formerly powerful tribal, and religious, and national loyalties into something like a world community.

But shedding old loyalties isn't easy, even if only for the purpose of making room for others. I've experienced this in making room for a brother, but others are experiencing it as a deep threat, made clear by the nativist voices that we hear calling for new protections around that which is supposedly "ours" in this country.

"Ours," the air we breathe? "Ours," the clean water we need for the basics of life?

Of all the aspects of the work, the most challenging during my twelve years as bishop has been to face what I've come to call such "entitlement thinking." Such thinking is like the quiet passing of gas in a closed car. It fouls the Spirit and leaves everyone gasping for fresh air and room to breathe. It is the opposite of a deep sense of gratitude, living from gift, the expansive, fresh sense that life means us well, and instead of binding and blinding us, calls us to a sense of "enough," and for disciples of Jesus, more than enough, pure gift, pure grace, gratitude.

There isn't time enough to talk about the ways in which such entitlement thinking is choking our church, but I think it is, and my fear is that it will finally demand all the air and smother us, cramping us down into cells of white-hot resentment that look a lot like the congregationalist model of church and

put us on an inevitable way to the “Sheilaism” anticipated by sociologist Robert Bellah. It reminds me of the classic joke about the shipwreck survivor, who after years alone on an island is finally rescued. He’s eager to show his rescuers the world he’s built for himself, and passing along, points out a small church and then later a second church building. Asked why he needed a second church the man replied, “Oh I had a fight in the first place and left!” And so it goes.

Against this model of culture and church I believe God intends to call us from gratitude, that expansive sense of release, unbinding, and joy that comes, ultimately, from the gift of trust, the most ancient way we connect with God.

The well I draw from as a disciple and as a church leader is Luther’s description, in the introduction to the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, that—and here I paraphrase—“Our god is that which we ultimately trust, the place to which our hearts incline, cling, and entrust themselves.” As a believer and as a church leader, the first matter of concern—and discipleship—is a matter of the heart.

So, to reflect on discipleship as a church executive, my attention turned to my own “habits of heart” and brother Bonhoeffer’s provocations on Matthew 6, particularly section 167 entitled “The Simplicity of Carefree Life.” It’s here that Bonhoeffer turns to Luther and the first commandment as well.

Luther and Bonhoeffer spend a good deal of time addressing the false god of mammon and, like you, I don’t spend any time worrying about that except as I obsess about the 10% of my salary I gave up two years ago, a gift I’m pretty sure nobody remembers! No, the line that caught my attention was this line from Luther: [P. 386ff, Kolb/Wengert, para 10]: “So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family,

and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God.”

Great learning, wisdom, power (or ambition), honor (or reputation)—and I think we could add today, “conscience”: these are the false gods that draw my eye as a bishop.

I say this to those of you who wonder if you should be called to the office of bishop: It’s true what they say: if you pursue the office out of ambition then you will always wonder if it is God’s call. When you reach for authenticity and the deep authority of the gospel all you’ll remember is that it was always about you. A New Yorker cartoon from 2008 has the patron leaning over the bar whispering to the bartender: “I’m nothing, and yet I’m all I can think about.”

And if you seek wisdom without understanding where it comes from—unusually terrible loss and the way of the cross—and yearn to be known as one who is wise, you will always know that such wisdom is a false god to which you cannot give your heart because you avoid suffering.

To rely on the god of great learning is to end up, as I have, with an office full of books that mock me because I haven’t read them.

Finally, my favorite false god is worry. Here is Bonhoeffer: “We want our worrying to make us worry-free.” Hmm.

Against these challenges I’m here with you today to learn more about the heart and how it trusts, how it follows after the source of trust. I’m here because I think I have seen in these famous lines from Pastor Bonhoeffer what the heart looks like when it clings to Life Itself:

“Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, Thou knowest O God, I am thine!"

The clinging heart, fresh and wet in the embrace of God, lives in ultimate gratitude.

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmann@charter.net.

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