

The Pastor's Job

Colleagues,

I've been away for seven days. Some months ago my wife and I observed our 40th wedding anniversary, an event to which over-generous children responded by underwriting a mid-winter break in a place where palm trees grow. My wife has drilled many useful things into me over the years, among them the ironclad rule that work gets left at home when you go on vacation. We both obeyed the rule this time, chiefly by sinking into novels we wouldn't find the hours for otherwise. One of mine, Khaled Hosseini's [*A Thousand Splendid Suns*](#), was good enough to merit a Thursday Theology report one of these days. If I should never get to that, you'll want to read it anyway, with an ear tuned for themes of Mary's "Magnificat." They're weaved through it—from the author's perspective, unintentionally, I should think—from beginning to end. This calls for much musing.

Such musing is not for me today, of course. Day One of post-vocation calls for other things, like returning to the heap of work you left behind, and refocusing both mind and heart on the tasks that loom tomorrow. As it happens, I was graced a few weeks ago with the perfect gift for any pastor who needs, for whatever reason, to get wits reassembled in speedy order. It reached me indirectly. I wrote to the author, Dick Hoyer, a retired ELCA pastor with deep LCMS roots, and got his permission to pass it along for your refreshment too. That includes those of you whose lay vocation might include the occasional and gentle prodding of a pastor on the topic of what he or she is finally there to do. There's not a stole-wearer in the land who doesn't need to keep rethinking that—or, come to think of it, who couldn't learn a thing or two from the humble example of Hosseini's Mullah Faizullah; but now I'm musing again...

Thank you, Dick, for today's gift. As for your 60+ years of faithful attention to your calling, thanks be to God!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

"Keep the Sabbath!"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Richard O. Hoyer
on the 60th Anniversary of his Ordination

August 21, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 58:9b-14, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17

([Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Proper 16](#))

+ Veni Creator Spiritus +

People of God, sisters and brothers,

Sixty years ago, last Friday, a few score Lutherans gathered in a 90 year-old farmhouse in a suburb of Chicago called Franklin Park to ordain and install their first full-time pastor. Me.

Jeanne and I with our two-month-old baby had just moved in upstairs. Downstairs was the church. They had taken down the wall between the living room and dining room, and stuffed in as many wooden folding chairs as they could. At the far end they jammed in an old, second-hand, wooden altar, but unfortunately it didn't quite fit. So they had cut six inches off the top of the altar's back, making it look like it pierced the ceiling, and six inches off the bottom so that I had to stoop to reach it.

Sixty years ago. The Ordination Service was very simple. The District's Director of Missions presided, my brother George preached, my father and mother were there and I think one other neighboring pastor. They laid hands on me, prayed for the Spirit's inspiration, and I became a pastor.

The next morning I sat down in my tiny office upstairs, a former walk-in closet, and said to myself, "Now what am I supposed to do?"

Oh, I knew, of course. I was well trained. And I did it, as best I could. But it brings up a very good question: what are pastors supposed to do?

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Well, we ask pastors to do lots of things. For one thing, we expect them to be skilled *administrators* who can run an institution smoothly. We want them to be "*pillars of society*," examples of morality and uprightness, nannies who shake a stick at us, giving the word "sermon" a bad reputation. We want them to be "*change agents*" who will sew up the rips in the social fabric. We want them to be "*enablers*," helping us do good things. And, of course, confirmations, weddings, funerals, all that stuff. And that's fine.

We Lutherans, however, recognize that all that stuff is peripheral, on the edges of their work. It's like the work in an apple orchard. Picking and marketing apples is the peripheral work. The real, fundamental work is the planting and taking care of the apple trees! Without a tree, there is no fruit. So in the church, the first and fundamental job of the pastor is to plant and nourish the tree.

That job, for Lutherans, is spelled out in our founding document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530 which says, in Article

Five, *“To obtain such faith—that is the faith that is defined in the previous article, the faith that trusts that God forgives our sin through the cross of Christ alone—to obtain such faith, God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments...”*

And there you have it: that’s the job of pastors. They are to proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion so that the Holy Spirit can create faith in us, faith that God forgives our sin through Christ’s sacrifice on that cross. When we have that faith we can produce the good fruit the world so badly needs.

Which brings us to today’s Bible readings. Today, through these readings, the Holy Spirit is in our face, telling us to **“Keep the Sabbath!”**

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The Sabbath. That word, at its root, means simply, Stop! Stop and rest! So keeping the Sabbath means stop doing all this stuff we’re so busy with all week long and rest on the Sabbath Day. But that rest isn’t merely physical, like taking a nap, but a rest with God. The Sabbath is a day to stop what we’re doing and listen to our God! The Third Commandment doesn’t say, “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it restful.” No, it says, “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy!” If we’re supposed to keep it “holy,” then it has something to do with God, not our physical well-being. Luther, in his Small Catechism, taught us this: *“We should fear and love God that we may not despise God’s word or the preaching of it, but gladly hear it and learn it.”* Keeping the Sabbath is not about physical resting, but about having a quiet conversation with God at the kitchen table—or at this table, the one we sometimes call an altar.

But we don’t do that very well, do we. We do sit down at this

table most Sundays, but do we really listen to our God? It's so hard! I'm afraid, speaking from my own experience, we mostly just sit here and ignore God as though he were a stranger sitting next to us on a bus. Think how that must hurt him! He loves us! He paid the price of that cross to get us to listen to him, to talk with him, live with him, but we don't. We ignore him!

Keeping the Sabbath is not easy. Our spiritual forbears, in Old Testament days, distorted the Sabbath to make it easier. Instead of stopping to listen to God, they turned keeping the Sabbath into a set of rules about resting. Don't do any work! Don't build a fire to warm your house or cook your food! Don't travel beyond a certain distance, and so on. Oh, the intent of all that was good. After all, you can't sit at the kitchen table and talk with God if you're working, or cooking, or travelling or whatever. But the result was the distortion of the Sabbath: the means became the point. Instead of not working so that you can listen to God it became a matter of not working so that your body can get some rest and God won't be mad. You know?

Well, Jesus wouldn't let them get away with that! He kept breaking those Sabbath rules to show them what keeping the Sabbath really means. That's why he got such a bad reputation among the religious folk of his day, especially the professionally religious. In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus leading a Bible study in the local synagogue on the Sabbath day when he notices a crippled woman, all bent over and twisted so that she could hardly walk, couldn't see the sky, the clouds and the stars, couldn't see the faces of the people who loved her. His heart broke for her, so he stood up and called to her, way in the back with the women, to come forward. And there he healed her, right then and there, **on the Sabbath!** Well, you know, that's work! Jesus was working on the Sabbath! Shame on you, Jesus! And he did that sort of thing over and over again.

He did it deliberately, shoved his disobedience in the faces of all those pious scribes and Pharisees and priests!

Why? What's he telling us? He's telling us that the point of the Sabbath is not merely to keep the rule of not working, but to stop and listen to God so we can live with him! Not ignore him, but live with him! The prophet Isaiah said that very thing in today's First Lesson: *"If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,"* that is, if you keep the Sabbath rightly, *"then you shall take delight in the LORD."* You will live with him and find your joy with him!

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Let me summarize: First, the Office of the Holy Ministry is the job of proclaiming the good news that Jesus' death on that cross and his triumphant resurrection has brought us the forgiveness of sin, and with that gives us God as our Father, enables us to live with God, and inspires us to work for God. Second, we are to keep the Sabbath, that is, hear that proclamation of the Gospel from those in the Office of the Holy Ministry, hear the promise it contains, and to trust that promise with our life.

So let's keep the Sabbath now: Hear the Word of God in today's Second Lesson:

"...you have come to Jesus, to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

You know what he's talking about, don't you? Cain and Abel, in the Bible's story, are sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, filled with murderous jealousy, beats his little brother to death. God, in his holy wrath, confronts Cain, *"What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground."* Crying out for vengeance.

Shouldn't it? What kind of God would he be if he winked at what Cain did, muttering something about boys will be boys? And what kind of God is he if he shrugs at the violence and evil that we do or would like to do, the ugliness that is in our very hearts, while muttering something about our being merely human?

But the blood of Abel crying out for vengeance is not the blood God listens to. Our Lesson says, You have come to "*the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word.*" That blood is the blood of Jesus, shed for us on that cross. That blood does not cry out for God to take vengeance on sinners, to give us the punishment we deserve, but the blood that speaks the "*better word*", the word of forgiveness.

"*Sprinkled blood,*" the text says. "Sprinkled" is a word the Old Testament priests used, talking about the blood of the sacrifice that the high priest takes into the temple and sprinkles on the Ark of the Covenant for the forgiveness of the sin of God's people.

How can the blood of an animal forgive sin? It can't. Except that, like a sacrament, it points to the one sacrifice that *does* atone. In the same way our pastor, in the Office of the Holy Ministry, sprinkles that blood each Sunday, so to speak, standing before this altar, proclaiming the Gospel Jesus spoke: "*This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.*"

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Are you hearing that? Then I'm doing my job in the Office of the Holy Ministry. Are you believing it? Are you trusting the promise God is giving you here? Then you are doing yours. You are keeping the Sabbath.

Do it! Observe the Sabbath rest by resting in the arms of Jesus!

When you are *ashamed of yourself*, filled with guilt and self-contempt for what you are and for what you do, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

When you are *afraid* that you aren't worth a thing because you're not rich, not successful, not pretty or handsome, unwanted, unloved, alone, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

When your *heart is broken*, when violence bloodies your world, when your soul is empty and the world seems cursed, when you feel that it would be better to end it all, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

When you *get old* and hear the knock on the door and know that on the other side is "death's bright angel," and you are afraid that you are about to get what you deserve from a holy God, or, worse, that you are about to become nothing, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

How good it is to call you to this Sabbath rest! How good to have done this job in the Office of the Holy Ministry for 60 years. How better still it is when you do your job, when you believe the Gospel proclaimed in this place, and, in believing it, you live with God.

Keep the Sabbath, people. Then the work of the Office of the Ministry will get done, and you will find rest for your souls.

+ In Nomine Domine +