

The “So What” Factor

So what? is a question I've asked myself many times in the last months as I've tried to figure out how to minister from law/gospel theology in a context that doesn't look anything like a traditional Lutheran congregation (a new city ministry, Faith Place, in the Fox Park neighborhood of St. Louis). Is it really going to make any difference if I adhere to what I was taught by my theological teachers as I try to do the best I can working with people who haven't grown up and been trained in an Americanized northern European way of thinking? As I've struggled with these questions, I remembered what brought me into this part of the church catholic in the first place. It wasn't listening to theologians argue amongst themselves, as entertaining as that can be at times, but it was Crossings semester long classes. In those classes we first took time to look at a scripture passage, got our grounding in the Bible, and then looked at a slice of church history that pertained to the topic at hand. The clinchers for me came next – we tracked a slice of our own lives, meaning we looked closely at a portion of our own lives that we needed help understanding. Finally, we laid the Biblical grounding over the tracking, our own slice of life, and experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit as we saw at this intersection how our unfaith/faith did indeed impact every molecule of our lives.

Grounding, tracking, crossing – those classes were half Bible study, half group therapy, but it was in that connection between faith and daily life made plain that I found my vocation as a pastor and continue to wrestle with theological issues because I know in every fiber of my being that it matters.

So, in trying to figure out how to do ministry where I am now and after some conversation between Ed and I, an idea occurred

to me. Could we do similar work, grounding, tracking, crossing, with our respective ministry contexts? Those of us who are walking out into unfamiliar territory or even those of us who are in traditional territory which isn't the same as it used to be – would a grounding, tracking, crossing of a slice of our ministry lives be helpful? For those of us who don't depend on the third use of the law for an ethical compass, what do we do?

Ed and I gave it a try, more or less accidentally. He critiqued something I'd written (surprise, surprise!) and I wrote back with a little slice of life, more or less daring him to make sense of this context. He did a crossing on it and a glimmer of hope sprung up inside of me that this still might be a good way to make sense of what I'm doing and help me give the best I can to the people with whom I work.

So, we offer as exhibit A of a theological experiment our exchange in hopes that some of you might like to try your hand at this. Do you have a slice of life from your context that you'd be willing to share with the THTH community and allow Ed or me to do a crossing using your experience? Of course it won't have the depth of face to face contact over a semester, but it might spark some thoughts and open some ways of ministering that heretofore hadn't come to mind.

This isn't about academic combat. This is about people doing ministry helping other people doing ministry. If you are pastor of an old Swedish congregation that worships in a building in a neighborhood that is now mostly Hmong, you probably have some questions about how to proceed. Can we help each other?

Peace and Joy,
Robin Morgan

How would you preach the law to a nine year old who lives with her mother, (who gets into cars that drive up and emerges a little while later with money), her six or seven siblings (who all have different last names) in a house that the police know well because of the gang members and “uncles” who hang out there. Would you say God hates you because you are a sinner? She already lives in hell. Even Luther’s “we are all beggars” is only a description of her day to day existence. How do you speak the law to such a person? This is important because it’s part of the reason Lutheran theology gets rejected by people doing such ministry. What if you are now living the consequences of the rebelliousness against God of our society? Through no fault of your own, you were born into a family that lives in the midst of the off scouring of our culture that allows some people in the St. Louis area to live in million dollar houses in gracious country settings while you sweat it out in an old brick apt. building that hasn’t been updated since it was built in 1904.

A Luther quote that might be helpful here is something Martin Marty used in his latest MEMO in the Christian Century. “If you listen to the Law, it will tell you: ‘In the midst of life we are surrounded by death,’ as we have sung for ages. But the Gospel and our faith have changed this song and now we sing: ‘In the midst of death we are surrounded by life!’ Media morte in vita sumus.”

Death is all over the place, these people know about death. Death is the norm, life is what’s different.

In haste, Using John 20, Easter 2 Gospel.

Use specific terms from the Johannine text if at all possible.

If he doesn't say Wrath of God, you don't need to either. Distinction between the comfortable and afflicted is no big deal in John 20, I'd say. Death just reigns in different ways.

D1 *Daily life (even after Mary Magdalene types have preached Easter to us Christians) still living behind locked doors for fear of something or other. Something perceived to be deadly, probably IS deadly. Something that negates Christ's Easter. Its voice drowns out what Magdalene told us. Lots of that stuff going around in Fox Park doubtless.*

D2 *That's "being faithless, and NOT believing" not trusting that JC is God and Lord, also over death—not just his own death, but mine as well. Unfaith that he is Lord and God over my death and all that threatens me with extinction. And of course the death voices are powerful. So trusting them doesn't sound so crazy.*

D3. *But trusting them opens the door to their having the Last Word. Thus when we Christians do so, we are forfeiting all the goodies he's already bestowed on us (and offers to bestow here again when he breaks in to the disciples locked-door fear-FULL room—Sunday after Sunday according to this text!) What are those forfeited goodies? In this text specified as: Shalom (= Peace with God,) Having the very breath of God's own Spirit/Life animating our persons, having Forgiveness of sins. N.B. all these are God-problem solvers—Goodies to trump all D-3's everywhere. Their opposites are God-problems no shalom, no God-Spirit, no forgiveness. Or expressed otherwise: Having the "god-problem" that Death really is our Lord and God.*

[John does talk about wrath of God—e.g., end of chapter 3 – shortly after John 3:16! But not here in Jn 20. Wrath of God is NOT mostly God getting pissed—though some texts (esp OT) render it that way. Rather esp in the NT it's God saying: If you won't

let MY “good and gracious will” be done, I’ll countersign your preference and say: OK, YOUR will be done. Jesus’ own encounter with wrath of God—for us and for our salvation—was signalled in his cry of dereliction—forsakenness.]

Step 4. Good news is that JC comes through our locked doors, our “Death is the real God and Lord I trust” Sunday after Sunday! and says Lookee here. My death marks FOR YOU. My deathmarks signalling death conquered FOR YOU. Also the death stuff here in Fox Park. Touch and make them your own. Try them out here in FP [Hah!: FP = Fox Park and Faith Place!]

Step 5. Touching = believing/trusting, and when put into words, confessing this one as MY Lord and My God. Such confession (last verse in the text) conveys the Life that is in his name—cum all those goodies mentioned in D3 above as stuff forfeited when Christians switcheroo back into locked-door mode.

Step 6 As the Father sent me....

Go out and undo death’s grip—wherever you meet it. Start in the Fox Park ‘hood. Where there’s lots of it. The core is getting peoples’ sins forgiven, their God-problem healed. That’s for starters. Other goodies come along with that package. Death’s grip, of course, is also out in St. Charles [wealthy St. Louis suburb], but you don’t live there anymore.