

Theology Befitting a Bishop—a Proposal, an Offer

Colleagues

Elizabeth Eaton was elected Bishop of ELCA Northeastern Ohio Synod last Saturday. I do not know her. But I do know one who was on the ballot—and so do you from reading ThTh posts in the past. Jerry Burce, Crossings board member and pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in that synod was also nominated. As successive ballots reduced the field, he made the final three. When asked what he thought he might do if he got the job, he spoke his piece. It was a peace-piece. I have his permission to pass his peace along to you for your own Advent edification. Preceding that I'll copy his self-presentation posted on the synod website in the weeks before the election. If some other synod has an episcopal vacancy, folks in that synod just might want to read this.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Preliminary stuff. Northeastern Ohio Synod Bishop Election Committee Bishop Candidate Questionnaire

Name: Jerome Burce

Please answer the following questions. Answers must be contained to one page and will be duplicated exactly as received and distributed to voting members. Form must be returned by October 20.

1. Name three gifts for ministry you possess and how they would influence your vision as bishop. Gifts.

- a. Long ago some excellent teachers helped me start to understand why the death and resurrection of Jesus is fantastic news for me and for every other sinner in the world today. I've been learning more about that ever since. These days I feel it in my bones as the one, essential gift that we Lutherans have for each other, for the rest of the Church, and for the world.
- b. I've discovered over the years that I'm able to pass the gift along, making the Gospel come alive for others especially in my preaching and teaching.
- c. When I talk and think with other pastors, many seem to find my contributions helpful, especially on the subjects of reading Scripture and making sense of who we are as Lutherans.

Vision: Luther wrote that "the true treasure of the Church is the Gospel of the grace and glory of God [in Christ crucified]" (Thesis 62 of the famous 95). I see the saints of a growing synod nodding their heads in joyful agreement with this, thanking God that he has made them rich beyond measure with the promise of Jesus. Better still, I see those saints passing the Gospel treasure back and forth between themselves, and sharing it freely with their neighbors, and drawing from it to bless the world around them with mercy and goodness, courage and hope. They're doing this because week in and week out their pastors are making their hearts sing in Christ, and they can't help it. The pastors are doing this, in part because behind them stands a bishop who keeps getting their hearts to sing in Christ as well, making them glad for their work and eager to hone the skills they bring to it.

2. What would be your four priorities if elected bishop?

First: To encourage the confidence-at every level of the synod, but especially among pastors-that Lutherans do have a treasure to offer the world and the ability to offer it cleanly, without strings, as Gospel capital "G." We are not "just another church." Why? Because the Holy Spirit has seen fit to teach us the difference between the Law and the Gospel and insists that we use that knowledge to make others rich in Christ and to glorify God. Second: To increase conversation about the systems and practices by which the Gospel treasure gets offered and passed around in our congregations. How are pastors and lay leaders going about their tasks? What constitutes a good confirmation program, or adequate preparation for baptism? In all our approaches to daily congregational life, can we identify "best practices" that all congregations would be encouraged to follow? Where is the synod's help and support needed most, and how do we get congregations to take advantage of that support?

Third: To strengthen our determination and ability as a synod to offer the treasure in places where it's most needed, especially in the poorer neighborhoods of our region, and to people anywhere who are trying to live without Christ.

Fourth: To keep refreshing our pastors and other professional leaders in the joy of their calling, and to visit or otherwise stay in contact with them as frequently and regularly as possible, with particular attention to our younger pastors.

3. How would you address racism in the Churchwide, synodical

and congregational expressions of the ELCA?

- By approaching it as the stubborn sin it is—not the only such sin that afflicts the ELCA, nor even the most worrisome, perhaps, but still, a sin. Where I encountered it I would address it forthrightly with the Law of God that forbids it and the Gospel of God that overthrows it.
- By pressing for connection and conversation between congregations of different ethnic or racial majorities. Let us eat and talk and pray together in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amazing things will happen when we do.
- By asking why the ELCA, for all its emphasis on ecumenism, has had so little formal conversation with the historic black churches and has done so little to encourage it at synodical and congregational levels.
- By making it a personal priority to thank God for our minority congregations and pastors, and to support their mission.

4. How would you strengthen everyone's knowledge of and participation in synodical ministries?

- By reinforcing good systems already in place, especially the website and the weekly email postings.
- By writing a bi-monthly bishop's column, suitable for re-producing in parish newsletters.
- By strengthening the expectation that pastors and other professional leaders, "the informational gatekeepers," will attend the conference and synod meetings where information is accentuated and prioritized.

Address to the Election Assembly, Northeastern Ohio Synod 2 December 2006

The peace of the Lord be with you...

Two things happened just now in this little exchange of ours. First, we wrapped each other in some incredible words. Second, in doing so we repeated ourselves; we used words that all of us have used a thousand times before. Both these things, the words themselves and the repeating of them-both cut to the heart of what your next bishop has simply got to be for.

Let's start with the words. "The peace of the Lord," we said. It's a stock phrase, a ho-hum sort of thing-until you slice it open and shake it. Then all kinds of wonderful things come tumbling out. The Lord, of course, is the only begotten Son through whom God loved the world and loves it still. Christ Jesus, put to death for our trespasses, raised again for our justification-raised that is to make us right. How right does he make us? So right that the Holy Spirit, looking now on this otherwise motley assemblage of well-meaning Middle Western trespassers has something quite astonishing to say:

"All things are yours," says the Spirit, speaking through the apostle. "Whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, the future-all are yours." Notice, not all will be yours, not all could, all might be yours, if only you'd make that red-blooded American Christian try really, really to accept Jesus, if only you'd roll up your true blue American Christian sleeves and do some real peace and justice, if only you'd get 20 more people in your pews and the men to sing, then some things, a few things, might possibly be yours-yes?

"Please!" says the Spirit. All things are yours. Because you

are Christ's and Christ is God's all things are so yours that right now, in this moment you have the right, the power, the authority, the calling, the divine mission to stride the earth as the sons and daughters of God that in Christ you are, forgiving sins in Jesus' name, not forgetting that in forgiving sins you are in fact addressing every human being's deepest need, that all-encompassing need to be all right with God, as all right with God as you are right now, the peace of the Lord being with you, the Spirit says.

Tell me, would the people in our assemblies tomorrow be at all surprised to hear this? Hearing it, how many, do you think, would sit there dumbfounded?

And now imagine: imagine that all the saints of our synod were taking what the Spirit says for granted. Imagine what they'd look like. Imagine what they'd be doing. I'll tell you one thing they wouldn't be doing. They wouldn't be moping about those high tech palaces the evangelicals keep throwing up. They'd be too busy to mope-too busy telling and living the Gospel of Christ Crucified with a flair, an integrity, that the evangelicals can't match. They aren't steered by the Augsburg Confession. You are.

Faith in who we are on Christ's account-that faith comes from hearing, and what is heard comes from the Word of Christ. Stronger faith comes from the Word of Christ incessantly repeated, incessantly heard. At some point in the repetition little Pentecosts happen and the saints catch fire. I've seen it. You've seen it too. Saints on fire, warming the world with courage and mercy, hope and joy, all of it gushing from the good news they hear and tell-that's God's agenda for the Northeastern Ohio Synod.

Our former bishop knew this. He served that agenda faithfully

and well.

Key to the agenda of course are the pastors of our synod. God be praised for each of them. They're the ones who tomorrow will slice open texts and phrases and tumble out the Gospel treasure that makes us all rich. Week after week they're the ones who keep bathing the saints in the bracing Word of Christ.

Only sometimes we pastors don't. Sometimes we're distracted, sometimes bored, sometimes daunted by the gloom and evil that touches our lives too. Sometimes, God help us, we're lazy. Too often we're simply the Peter who can't bear to keep walking on the watery surface of a word too good to be true. He looks out on Sunday at saints, yet all he sees are the empty seats. "All things are mine?" he thinks. You've got to be kidding."

For the sake of God's agenda in our synod, get us a bishop who will be especially for pastors the hand of Jesus lifting us up when we slip beneath the waves. Get us the voice of Jesus commanding us again and again to feed his sheep. Get us a bishop whose words, strong and glad and unrelenting, will be the testimony of the Holy Spirit, that Christ Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead, is and was and ever shall be for us, for all his holy Church, and for the world he sends us to as the Father first sent him.

Once again, and in your discerning: the peace of the Lord be with you.