

“Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?” (Part 1)

Co-Missioners,

This is another offering from your editor, Jerome Burce. In passing it along he observes that it's been a long time in gestation, and is still a work in progress. A prelude of sorts appeared three and a half years ago in Thursday Theology. It [introduced and accounted for the essay's brusque title](#). That the essay itself is starting finally to come your way has to do in part with two recent events. The first was the furor that erupted in the United Methodist Church last month over gay and lesbian relationships, a replay of things seen in other mainline groups, though with a different outcome. The Lutheran version of this furor is one of the precipitants of Jerry's essay, so it seemed to him timely that he start pushing it your way.

An even better reason for this was last week's death—St. Paul would call it the falling asleep—of Edward H. Schroder, esteemed pastor and doctor of the church, teacher to Jerry and countless others, co-founder of Crossings, Gospel purveyor par excellence. Jerry notes that what you're about to read is critically dependent on a sharp nudge he once got from Ed. It happened so long ago and in such a manner that he can't imagine Ed ever recalling it. Still the nudge happened, and, decades later, thoughts tumbled out. What better way, says Jerry, to thank and praise Almighty God for gifts granted through Ed than by passing these scraps along.

What you're getting is the first installment of multipart piece, as Jerry will explain.

Ed's funeral is set for next week Wednesday, 10 a.m., at Bethel

Lutheran Church in University Heights, Missouri. For further details, [see the obituary](#). For the sake of many who can't make the funeral but would like even so to gather in Ed's honor and memory, with thanks to God above all, the Crossings Board of Directors is planning a follow-up event in June. Details will be announced very soon.

*Peace and Joy,
The Crossing Community*

"Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?" Part 1.

by Jerome Burce

"If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Thus Christ our Lord, in the snippet of John 8 that Lutherans hear once a year on Reformation Sunday.

To hear is one thing, of course. To grasp is quite another. I will hazard a guess that most of the men and women who expound on this text from Lutheran pulpits year after year are faking it. What Jesus says eludes them. See, for example, how they hate each other.



So much for an abstract of the essay to follow. It looks to be long one, coming to you in several installments. God grant a brighter mood as the writing unfolds.

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God's good news in Christ Jesus has eluded me, the sinner who writes this, for much of my life. Count me until recently among those Reformation Sunday fakers.

Or to put that more gently, count me among the baptized multitude that sees only in part, near blindness being the norm. At issue is the kind of vision St. John explores at length throughout his Gospel. It happens not through eyes, nor even the heart, as the Western metaphor would have it, but somewhere in the viscera. It's the deep-down awareness that constitutes genuine knowing, in which words and concepts are finally and wonderfully married to recognition and experience. The gut gets

it. This happens to Thomas at the end of John 20. "My Lord and my God" is said with a gasp as the light flips on. Luther famously reports a similar gasp as he tussled with Romans 1. A quaff of glorious freedom came next, the taste of which so sears the memory that it cannot be forgotten.

I can point to three such gasps in the course of my own development as a servant of the Word. The first happened when I was in my second year of seminary, the next when I was teaching some second-year seminarians in the course of my first call, and the third about nine years ago as I responded on the fly to a parishioner's crisis of conscience. At issue in each case were problems of insufficient righteousness and intractable sin, the same matters that bedeviled Luther. The outcome every time was to find myself bouncing like a happy baby in the lap of Christ. Mingled with the giggles were prayers that others might know the same relief.

The key insight that drove Luther's work is hard to come by, and even harder to hang on to. The mantras coined to convey the insight—justification by faith; grace alone; saint-and-sinner—are easy to mouth. They're tough to swallow. Tougher still is to get them digested in such a way that they infuse a person's functional outlook on herself, her baptized brother, her stumbling, bumbling church. Somewhere deep in every gut is a granite-like deposit of *opinio legis*, as Luther and company called it, an aspect of which is the dread of being caught in public draped in sinners' rags. Driving the dread is a universal and, frankly, God-given assumption that there are other and better things for me to wear, if only I had the good sense and sartorial manners to pick them out from my behavioral or ideational wardrobes and put them on. Sound doctrine, of course, denies that any person is able to do this. From God's point of view we all lack the sense and are short on the manners. "There is no one who is righteous, no not one." Thus it is written—in

the marrow of our bones as well as the pages of Scripture. That doesn't stop anybody from trying to accomplish the feat. This includes the very people who champion the doctrine that says it can't be done. Here I think in particular of Luther's confessional heirs. I have yet in my all years, 66 and counting, to find a Lutheran or any group of Lutherans that wasn't at pains, the way everyone else is, to prove that our clothes aren't so shabby after all, if only in comparison with the eyesores that "those others" are shambling around in.

We need to quit it. That's the brunt of my argument today. It is way past time for us to recognize that the baby in Jesus' lap is always a very dirty baby, smeared with grime from head to toe. If she squeals with delight, it's in part because she notices how the adult who owns this lap doesn't seem to mind for once how dirty she is, the way those other pseudo-adults insist on doing. Why should he mind? Dirt, after all, is his specialty. He knows how to handle it, and what to do with it. Sensing this, the baby also doesn't mind that the kid bouncing over there on Jesus' other knee is as filthy as she is. If anything, she giggles all the more, so happy is she with the Savior that both of them get to enjoy. As the Man once said, "Unless you receive the kingdom of God like a little child, you shall not enter it."

Ain't that the truth.

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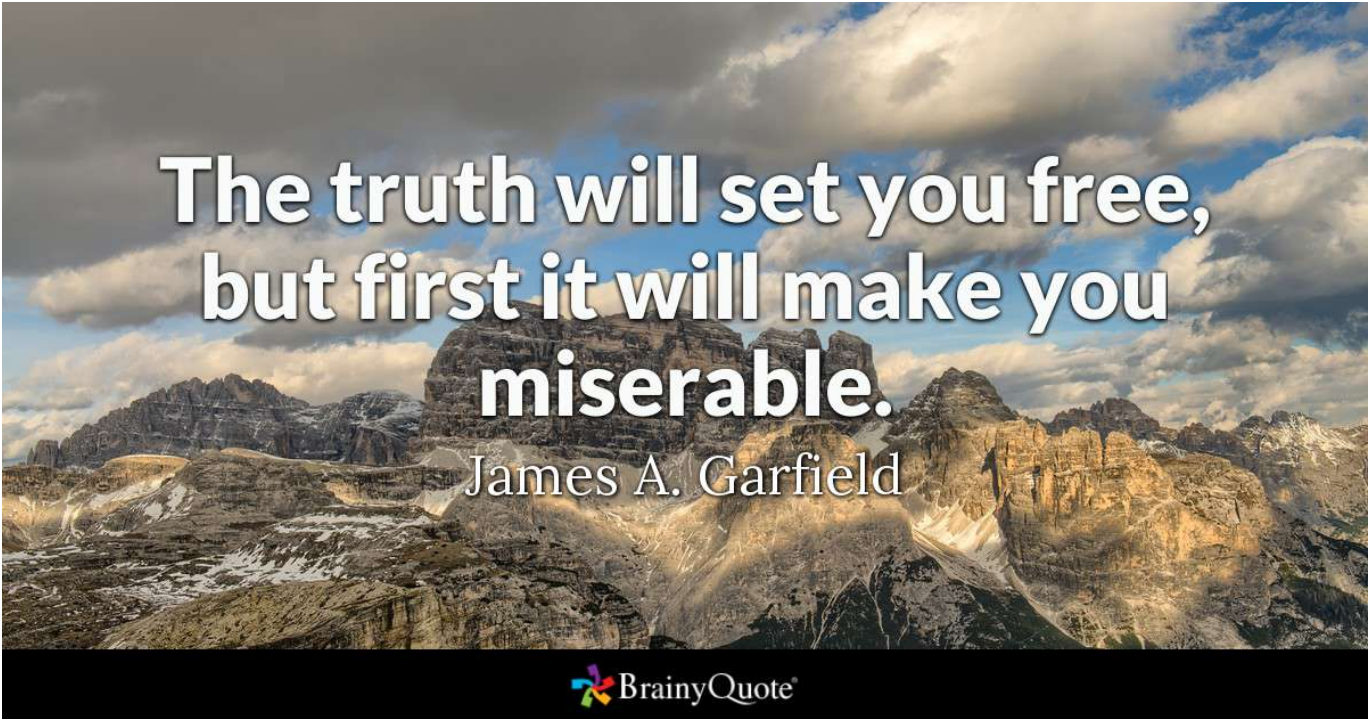
Here is when this light flipped on for me.

One afternoon the man walks in my office with trouble etched all over his face. Like me, he's a lifelong Lutheran, and the son of a Missouri Synod pastor. I say this as a point of fact, nothing more. It is not the ELCA renegade taking a subtle, sideways poke at the LCMS he left behind. That I should have to mention this is an indicator of the pickle we Lutherans are in.

Anyway, the man sits. He talks. He pours out his heart. Though a member for a while of this ELCA congregation, he suddenly feels that he can no longer commune here. After all, six months ago—or is it ten, or twelve—the churchwide assembly authorized synods and congregations to follow their own judgment in the matter of ordaining or calling pastors who are in open, committed, same-sex relationships. But to do this, he says, is sinful. And though our own congregation will not be following this path, still, are we not somehow endorsing sin by staying with the ELCA? And isn't the endorsement of sin a participation in sin? And if he should then continue communing here, won't he be sinning as well?

So now it's me who sits, who listens, who wonders what to say. And for a long minute my foot dangles over the precipice that we Lutheran lemmings keep rushing for like every other batch of sinners, whatever their label or flavor.

The precipice is the old, unwinnable argument that Adam and Eve have been locked in ever since they both opted to decide for themselves what is good and what is not. At its base are sharp and nasty rocks that break relationships apart. They sunder families. They splinter churches. Now and then they lead to war.



**The truth will set you free,
but first it will make you
miserable.**

James A. Garfield



So tempted I am in this moment with the grieving man to take the plunge. I ponder on how to make the case with him for staying in the ELCA. I wonder how I can persuade him that doing so is “the right thing” in this particular set of circumstances, or if not right, then at least okay; at least better than the alternative of trying to bail and breaking our own congregation apart in the process. I muse on whether or not to praise the ELCA for its “openness” and “inclusivity,” scoring points if I can with observations along the way about the “narrow mindedness” of the other crowd. But this won’t fly, I quickly decide. I don’t buy it myself. In any case, what weighs him down is the imperative of pleasing God by obeying God, the one whose Bible contains injunctions against same-sex relations. The other crowd seems to honor this as our crowd does not. They appear to him more righteous, and it will do no good with him, in this moment, to rehearse the arguments of 30 years or more by which the advocates of change, so called, have tried to persuade their opponents that these Biblical injunctions don’t apply to current circumstances and sensibilities. Even if I bought those arguments myself, they won’t persuade him. They’ll merely add to

his distress. He'll hear me siding with "the sinners." He'll hear me saying, "You are wrong." We all know what happens next. He'll get to his feet. He'll take his leave. The back of his head as he passes through my door is the last I'll ever see of him.

I toy with alternatives, the details of which I won't bother to rehearse. I'm certain that one or two will end like the first scenario, in immediate rupture. Another might serve to keep him with us for a few more months, another year or two at best; though he's sure to be sullen and half-hearted the way people get when they are quietly ashamed, as he will be. It will seem to him that he let his pastor talk him out of acting on the courage of his convictions. He'll try for a while not to think about it too much. At some point he'll slink away.

Isn't this how disputes about righteousness always end? Except this one didn't.

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I can't begin to say where the thought came from, or how it happened that the words expressing it began tumbling from my mouth. When, looking back, I thank the Holy Spirit for this, I do so for one reason only. It pulled us both away from the edge of the cliff and took us instead down the path that Jesus pointed to when he said, "I am the Way."

“Look,” I tell my troubled friend. “You’re afraid of sinning by communing with sinners. But isn’t it way too late for that? Have either of us ever participated in a communion, whether here or in any other church, that wasn’t a communion with



other sinners? Who else, after all, is communion for? And why would somebody think to bother with communing if he or she were not a sinner? As it happens, you and I have been eating and drinking together at the table these past several years. So take it as a matter of fact that I’ve been tarring you Sunday after Sunday with a great heap of my sin. And should I point out that you’ve dirtied me in turn, I can’t imagine for a moment that you’d argue with that.

“Here’s the thing,” I continue. “Who else is with us at every communion—a person as up to his neck as you and I are in the mess we sinners bring to it? Whose is the body, the blood, that we sully and contaminate when we eat and drink it? But to whom does he give this body and blood if not contaminating sinners? Does he, our Lord Christ, not have the wherewithal—the power, the authority, the everlasting Easter—to deal with the dirt and send us on our way smelling like roses, at least where God is concerned? Isn’t that the whole point of the eating and drinking?

“And by the way, have you or I ever heard this Christ of ours announce a limit on the nature, scope or magnitude of the sin he’s willing and able to deal with? Sure, bishops, theologians and assemblies have had all kinds of ideas along these lines over the church’s many centuries, but what about Christ himself?

Has he ever announced, for example, that he'll sully himself with straight sinners, though not with gay sinners? Or that only those sinners need apply for his touch who toe the party line as right-thinking or right-doing sinners? Is there anyone in our congregation—in the ELCA, the LCMS, the Wisconsin Synod, for that matter—that Christ would chase away from the true communion that happens in our own sanctuary every week? I call it true because it's anchored squarely in the word and promise of Jesus that we speak, hear, and remember every time it's offered. 'For you,' he says. Just plain 'you,' no modifying adjectives or conditioning adverbs hanging from it. As it happens, the 'you' who wind up getting the benefit of Christ's eucharistic touch are those sinners—only and always sinners; the self-styled 'righteous' tend to stay away of their own accord—who by the Holy Spirit's grace have just enough faith and nerve to walk up here with hands and mouths open to receive what Jesus gives.

"One last thought," I say. "If Christ won't hesitate to enmesh himself like this with a confused and messy bunch of ELCA sinners, why should we?"

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Truth in advertising: the above is not a verbatim report of that long-ago conversation, but an imagined reconstruction of it. Still, the gist of the thing is all there.

Looking back, I seem to recall my friend's face beginning to soften as I babbled down the path I had either stumbled or been driven onto; and when we got to the heart of the matter, Christ for sinners, his body relaxed too. Our parting was cordial that day. He was in church the next Sunday and came to communion, looking glad to be there. And so it continued until the day a job change took him to a city in another state.

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A sentence suddenly recalled from days in a “Lutheran Confessions” class for first-year seminarians: “For the true unity of the church it is enough—*satis est*—to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). As ground-level proof I submit this episode.

This noted, what surprises me most these days about the episode—it dismays me too—is the surprise I felt on thinking suddenly, after twenty five years in ordained ministry, to drag Christ into a conversation like this and hand the mess over to him. Isn’t this what servants of the Gospel are given to do as their first and last responsibility? I think now of Matthew’s parable of the talents (25:14-30), the point of which is to use Christ, to risk investing his benefits, and to avoid at all costs the stupidity of stashing them away in safekeeping for fear of cheating him off should one somehow misspend them. So why in countless hours wasted prior to this point on the gay sex debate had I kept Christ out of it, his benefits buried in a hole as if they were somehow irrelevant to the only argument that mattered. This of course was the legal one. “Who is right on this issue, and who is wrong? And what shall we do about the scoundrels who refuse to agree with us? Since when does God allow us to consort with sinners of that stripe?”

These days I’m asking a different question. “Since when does Christ permit us to dodge sinners of any stripe?”

Again, I can’t explain why it took me so long to get around to this. “Duh,” as my children might say. But then another conundrum: I wish I could observe that mine was one small voice in a great chorus of voices, all shouting the same question—that latter one, that is, compelled by the Gospel as opposed to the Law. But the chorus is not there, at least not that I notice.

Nor has it been. I would not have taken nearly so long to reach the path I finally followed had others flocked down it before me. Even people I learned the Gospel from have seemed reluctant to follow it.

I think we are all terrified of being caught in the open as sinners-in-truth. I think this terror insults Christ. It is also wreaking havoc with the church and the mission Christ entrusts to it. See again how we Christians hate each other.

These are the matters I plan to explore in this essay's next installment.

+ To God Alone the Glory +

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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