

Thursday Theology: A Pastor's Lamentation

Co-missioners,

Today's post is intended as something of a witness to everyone who loves the church in these years of its American decline. Our writer is Matt Metevelis. We'll hear from him again next week. If you follow Thursday Theology, you'll have encountered him a couple of times last year. He's also one of the newer additions to our team of text study writers.



Pastor Matt Metevelis and congregants

Matt is an ELCA pastor who lives and works in Las Vegas. Hospice chaplaincy has been his chief vocation for a while. Until two and a half months ago he was also the part-time associate pastor of what was known for most of its life as Reformation Lutheran Church. Located in downtown Las Vegas, it was already a struggling congregation when Matt began serving there. An effort to address those struggles led to its renaming in 2021 as Living

Hope Lutheran. The Covid pandemic was still gripping the world when the reboot happened. No wonder, perhaps, that Living Word closed its doors at the end of this past October, the final service taking place—fittingly? ironically?—on Reformation Sunday.

As a theologian, Matt is sharp, well-read, and vividly Lutheran. As a pastor, he is nothing if not passionate. A blazing faith in the Gospel will do this to a person. All this was on display when Matt wrote for us last year on the topic of ministry. [It's worth another look](#)—a first look if you missed it then. You'll find these same traits in his reflections today.

We ran across this piece on Facebook, where Matt hammered it out a few days before Reformation/Living Hope's final service. We asked him for permission to share it with you. In granting this he also sent us a copy of the sermon he preached on that tough closing day. We can't help but share this with you as well. For that, check in again next week.

Meanwhile a prayer: that every pastor in every fading congregation—there are lots of them these days—will throb with the honesty, the grief, and the love for the saints that you'll encounter here. How better to honor Christ?

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

A Pastor's Lamentation

by Matthew Metevelis

I'm composing a "Holy Closure" service for the little

congregation I've been serving for a while in downtown Las Vegas. Never in a million years did I think I'd be doing something like this. It's incredibly painful but it feels good. I'm almost free.

For about a year I've been drowning under this place. First trying to solve personality conflicts, then helping a very well-meaning interim whose health made him not up for the job, then delivering the bad news about the state our finances were in from years before the pastoral transition, then helping the council make decisions and hold the meetings that made a final vote on shutting down the place. Now with the right team finally pulled together we're just trying to finish strong.

The whole thing has been a nightmare. If I did not love this place with every little fiber of my heart I don't think that I would have made it. There's just too much in that place. School gave me a love for words and ideas. Seminary and the company of great preachers honed me into just what this gospel thing was. But, oh man, did this little church make a pastor out of me. I just can't see Jesus or the kingdom without the eyes of so many people there.



A PASTOR'S LAMENTATION

I'm really angry but I think that God knows I'll come back around.
After all, "Lord, to whom shall I go?"



A Pastor's Lamentation
From Canva

Here's what I mean. As the church keeps shrinking, as people continue to turn their back on religion just because they're busy or they're schlocking together some Do-It-Yourself spirituality crap, I just want to throw the towel in. I mean, just continue working at hospice doing tuck-in for the afterlife, and drift away giving Jesus the kindly shrug that everyone else gives him.

But then people from that damn church keep popping up in my mind. I'm in their living room again, or I'm in a Bible study long after the thing ended and I'm learning just why some verse or concept is a matter of life and death to them. Or I'm by them

in the hospital room again. Or I'm just thinking about some joke they told me, or some kindness that they showed my kids. And all I sudden it hits me, without Jesus I wouldn't have met any of these people. Kind of makes the whole nightmare worthwhile. These saints have been keeping me company during some hard times lately.

All this said I'm tired. I'm tired of shouldering the burden of a church for little money in my spare time. I'm tired of rushing through evening activities with my kids so I can stay up past midnight working on something for church and still keep focused at my paying day job. I'm tired of worrying about what crazy break-in or wild event is going to happen next. And I'm especially tired of the institutional church, its worn out rhetoric, its pretense that it has the answers when it doesn't, its utter dependence on people who have been supportive and faithful of the church for decades and its concomitant dismissal of them just because they don't buy into whatever shiny new enthusiasms their leaders think will attract the "right" kind of new members. The church may be here forever, but right now, in our time and in our place, it is in retreat and I'm tired of pretending it's not. It was worthwhile, life-giving, even just the way it was, and its loss is something worth grieving. Especially in a town where so many other options for Christian worship are basically cheesy and maudlin entertainment to ease consciences instead of challenging and comforting them.

I've said to people in deep loss who experience anger that the anger will subside given time, and to just pay attention to what the anger is telling you. For me I don't know. I know it's not healthy. But it won't go. I just need some time away. I've been just sitting in a Bible study at another church and it feels great. Weirdly enough, scripture has been coming back to me. I retreated into literature, thinking that story and the naked joy of the written word could breathe the life into me that

scripture could not. I made Philip Roth something of a spiritual Falstaff. But now I've gone back to scripture because it's the story that carries and embodies all the others. There's no story so happy that it doesn't reckon with a cross, and no story so sad that it can overshadow an empty tomb. Scripture is just bigger than I am, and bigger than anything that faces me. It's the still small voice that has come to me while I'm muttering to myself in the desert when everyone around me is chasing after Ba'al. I'm really angry but I think that God knows I'll come back around. After all, "Lord, to whom shall I go?"

I do love this stupid job for reasons I never thought I would. And maybe one day I'll come back. But right now all I can think about is just letting this go, having real weekends again, actually being there for my boys, and caring for my amazing wife who has been bearing this burden with me (and if I'm totally honest bearing the burden of me too!).

I can't get ministry out of me. But at least God is finally giving me an opportunity to get myself out of it, if only for just a season. And I'm thankful.

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

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