

Reformation-tide Spin on Law and Gospel (1)

Co-missioners,

Lutheran congregations will celebrate the Reformation this Sunday. Or at least we hope they will. Here we think chiefly of ELCA churches and the pastors who lead them. One of the concomitants of ecumenical rapprochement is a tendency to downplay the distinctiveness of one's own tradition and witness. To the extent that Lutherans succumb to this temptation, the Church as a whole is diminished, we think. One can surely thank God for the gifts of mainline Methodists, Anglicans, and Calvinists without pretending that Lutherans lack gifts for them to relish too. In the story Jesus told, the lord did not look kindly on the wretch who hid his talent.

Our aim this week and next is to flaunt our Lutheran talent with a bit of Crossings-style flair. To that end we draw on the hitherto unpublished keynote address that Jerry Burce delivered at our January conference in 2018. The theme, broadly considered, is Law and Gospel; more sharply, the way that due attention to the Law in its ultimate grimness unleashes the joy, relief, and freedom that gushes from the word of Christ crucified.

Why next week too, by the way? First, because we aim to keep our portions digestible. Second, because next week is October 31, the day Luther went public with his world-upending assertion: "The true treasure of the Church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God" (Thesis 62 of 95).

God grant his Church the faith, nerve, clarity that upends our

world today.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

THE TRUE TREASURE OF

THE CHURCH

IS THE MOST HOLY GOSPEL OF

THE GLORY AND

THE GRACE OF GOD.

-MARTIN LUTHER, THESIS 62, OCTOBER 31, 1517

From “The Lion and the Lamb”

Keynote Address at the 2018 Crossing Conference

by Jerome Burce

“I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” –Romans 1:16-17

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Following a brief introduction for newcomers to the Crossings Community and its founders—

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel,” Paul says. Neither, at Crossings, are we. In fact, we claim that lack of shame as our defining characteristic, being careful as we do to underscore that by “Gospel” we mean, or keep trying to mean, nothing less or other than Paul means when he uses the word. *Euaggelion* in Greek. In today’s English, the good announcement, the good message, or as we more often say “the good news.” All these, of course, are shorthand expressions, and the last of them is also a debased expression. Everybody has good news of one sort or another to peddle these days. Most all of it is trifling, and ever so parochial. For example: “While the Cleveland Browns lost all the games they played this year, the good news is, they get an extra draft pick.” I tell you in all sincerity that not even those of us from Northeast Ohio are the least bit thrilled by that—and yes, we are ashamed that this is all we have to tout when it comes to our team—our oh-so-feckless and depressing team.

Paul, in the starkest of contrasts, touts Jesus Christ, the Son of God whose birth we celebrated a few weeks ago, whose resurrection from a death by crucifixion we will sing and shout about this year on—of all things—April Fool’s Day, this by virtue of a coincidence of calendars that Paul would absolutely revel in. “We push Christ Crucified, an offense to Jews, the rant of blithering fools where Greeks are concerned, but to those called, whether Jew or Greek, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” That’s how Paul launches the first of his letters to the Corinthians, that little band of mid-first-century Christian types with whom his driving aim is the one that propels our work at Crossings. Those folks in Corinth have heard the story—the Jesus story, that is. Paul was the one who told it to them. What they haven’t quite tumbled to a few years

later is how this story of something that happened a while back translates now into actual Gospel, a word of God that strikes both ear and heart as good news in the strictest sense of the term. First, it is good. Inexpressibly good. Exclusively good. Poke and prod as you might, you won't find it tainted with the slightest speck of either information or implication that will cause your nose to wrinkle and your mouth to say, "Yes, but..."

Second, it is news, as in genuine news. You haven't heard it before, or at least not in the way you're hearing it now. It adds to the store of information you've been using to process the world around you and respond to the moment you presently occupy. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." For 1st century shepherds abiding in fields, that's news. They jump. They move. They go with haste, no less. They find. They gawk. They ooh, they ahh. They babble with their story. After that they wake up sleeping Bethlehem with the ruckus that the unfettered praise of God is bound to create. So tell me: since when has that statement drawn a similar reaction from 21st century suburbanites abiding in church pews? Answer: it hasn't. It doesn't. It can't. For these folks it isn't news, you see, but only the umpteenth repetition of a story they heard when they were kids. So on hearing it again they yawn. They fidget. They wish so hard there wasn't a sermon to suffer through between now and going home. Though perhaps for once a preacher will surprise them. She'll do, that is, what preachers are supposed to do and too often don't. She'll study. She'll pray. She'll focus her mind and summon her nerve. She'll dare to translate; she will make the scary jump from then to now. In other words, she will use that original statement to identify and authorize a fresh assertion of something God is saying to people today—this Christmas Eve, A.D. 2017, say. For example: "To you is given this very night the boundless love of God Almighty, embodied in the living presence,

right here, right now, of the same Christ those shepherds found in a manger, only you will find him in this bread and cup he so wants you to eat and drink from, and no he doesn't care how big a jerk you've been these past twelve months. That's *why* he's here, to save jerks. So come, check him out!"



And with such as this we've made the move from stodgy story to bona fide news. Ears will perk up, especially those attached to persons for whom Christianity these days is mostly a matter of unpleasant rumor, filled with tales of prudes and killjoys and pious hypocrites telling people what to do. Talk as I've imagined it just now will be for them a fresh experience, news indeed. But even those who know better, the ones whose experience includes encounters with Gospel-tellers who have a clue about their business, even they will respond when you tell it again as real-deal good news, a stunning word of God, impossibly excellent, addressed to the specificity of their

circumstances now.

That's what Paul is doing in that letter to the Corinthians. Again and again he grabs hold of the essential pieces of Jesus' story—his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension in particular—and he uses these to authorize astonishing assertions that speak directly to matters the Corinthians are wrestling with: issues of leadership, of morality, of communal behavior, of endless competition. Who is the better Christian, the real Christian, the Christian with a clue or with a stronger dose of Holy Spirit? Who is graced with grown up wisdom—sophistication, as we say today—in contrast to the rubes? Who is the righteous Christian, as in the one who gets it right, whatever “it” may be—who therefore basks in God's approval as the rest of you do not?

A comment in passing, anticipating too what seems to me a central issue that our conference here will grapple with these next few days: how Corinthian we Christians are in 2018, and dare I say, we Lutherans in particular, Lutherans who have long since out-Corinthianed the Corinthians by entrenching ourselves in hostile camps from which we stare at the other with withering contempt; and all our Christian platitudes—all our parroting of hoary phrases like “the forgiveness of sins” or “the love of God” or “the precious blood of Jesus” if that's how you still talk—does little if anything to mitigate the contempt. And of even less use are the slogans on the banners that wave above our tents. “Bible-believing” here. “Peace and justice” over there.

So our ears too are bound to perk up when Paul rolls up his sleeves and starts pitching Gospel at Corinth. Listen: “All things are yours.” Verb: present tense. Pronoun: second person plural, all-encompassing—these are both essential features of God's good news, genuine Gospel versus the wannabe stuff we're used to hearing. Again, “All things are yours, whether Paul,

Apollos, Cephas—the ELCA, the LCMS—the universe, life, death, the present, the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.” Put that in your pipe and smoke it for a while, and then let’s see what happens.

Crossings exists to push this kind of Gospel. We learned it from our teachers who helped us taste it, as if for the first time. I have vivid memories of that, as do others. You might say we’re addicted. We think others in the Church need to get hooked too. Lots of others. It would please Christ no end to find his people startling pockets of a grim, despondent America with the inexplicable sound of their joy in God. “Up weak knees and spirit bowed in sorrow / no tomorrow / shall arrive to beat you down. / God goes before you / and angels all around. / On your head a crown.” That’s a Bohemian Christ-confessor responding to the ring of real-deal Gospel in the 18th year of the 30 Years War, no end in sight. Our goal these next few days is to find out if God’s Good News can get the sixty people here making noise like that. sixty isn’t much, you say. The Holy Spirit, responding, reminds us all that God is used to getting great things started with far fewer people.

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A quick timeout so I can introduce Lori Cornell to those of you who don’t know her. Lori is one of Crossings’ key editors. She manages the production of weekly text studies that have flowed for almost two decades, without pause or interruption. into the inboxes of whoever subscribes to them. They’re available on our website too. The goal of these studies is to tap into the wellspring of Gospel that lurks beneath every text one encounters of a Sunday via the Revised Common Lectionary. That includes the dark, obscure and stony texts—a passage from Amos, say, on one of his cranky days. All Scripture, Luther said, drives us to Christ, even Amos, or on some days, especially Amos.

On Wednesday morning Lori is going to walk us through the methodology that she and her corps of writers follow to tap this Gospel and let it gush. I have no intention now of stealing her thunder, nor the time to do it either; but since you'll hear the methodology in play as discussions unfold these next few days, let me at least identify some key assumptions that undergird it. These come directly from the theological tradition, at once very deep and all too thin, that we try our best to channel. Of relevance for now—

First: genuine Gospel is always and necessarily anchored in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The incarnation is a secondary doctrine, which is not to say it isn't essential. How does God get to Golgotha if not through Mary's womb? But for the action that matters most to the people here this very morning, Golgotha is the place you go. May I never boast of anything, Paul says, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. To which Paul's disciple, Crossings' own Bob Bertram, adds this thought: the theologian's essential task is to *necessitate* Christ; to demonstrate why this Christ and him crucified is the only thing in all the world worth hanging your heart on.

Second: Gospel at its best emerges only and always against the back drop of un-Gospel at its worst. Worst-ever un-Gospel is a shepherd's sudden discovery on an otherwise quiet night that the jig is up; that he and his pals are two seconds shy of meeting our universal human future as dust and ashes—or, in their specific case, as scraps of charred angelic toast. No wonder they fear a mega-fear, as Luke so deliciously puts it. No wonder, then, the joy, the gasping, gushing joy, when the angel says "Fear not," then backs that up with a jolt of good news at its best, a word from God to them that cannot be, and yet it is. "For to *you* is born this day," etc.

Un-Gospel at its worst is news of God not for us but against us.

I call that news, because for most people it is, also in churches, and especially these days in mainline churches. "I can't—I won't—believe in that kind of God," they say. They say it the way one ostrich says to the other, both with heads beneath the sand, that the lion isn't there.

We at Crossings confess the lion. We also confess that we've each spent a life annoying it, a habit none of us can shake. Truth be told, Jerome the Sinner doesn't much care for lions, least of all the Lion in Chief. Nor does any other human being, however much some will claim to the contrary. Said lion, after all, is both author and enforcer of the un-gospel for which the theologian's usual word is "law." Law constitutes the skeleton that our lives in this world are built both on and around. It makes all things work, more or less. It keeps them in order, more or less. We often appreciate it, more or less. We're obliged always to thank God for it, and never less, but only and always more than we do. Such thanks are tough, or shall I say impossible, because the law also presses on us—to change the baby's diaper, say, or take out the trash, or do the homework, or earn an honest living; and behind the pressure is the weight of the lion's paw. Therein the trouble. When we do such things well, we praise ourselves and expect God to chime in. When we do them poorly or not at all, we resent the consequences we're forced to suffer, and we're sure to find a way, as Adam did in the garden, to lay the fault for that at God's feet. "That woman *you* gave me..."

No wonder the lion develops an appetite for ostrich. These days he'll find heaps of them in churches where heads are buried both to mute the lion's roar and to foster the illusion that all it takes to placate the lion is for an ostrich to sing louder, try harder, and advance whatever sociopolitical agenda said ostrich thinks the lion prefers. I say this, of course, with tongue in cheek, but only partially. There are some deep and serious

reasons for this illusion that I'll get to in a while. Suffice it for the moment to observe that the illusion is, in fact, an illusion. Remember Amos? That's his message, beginning to end. God is not safe. But who of a Sunday morning imagines that God is using Amos to roar directly at them? What Lutheran preacher is daring to say that these days?

But how, if such things are not said, can today's Lutherans taste the Easter joy that Sunday mornings are meant to advance? Eleven men huddle and cower behind a locked door for fear of the Jews—you know the story. Silly creatures, for fearing so small. Look: there's Jesus. John says nothing at this point of a mega fear like the one Luke's shepherds felt, but even so, I can't imagine that Peter's heart, for one, hasn't frozen in mid-beat. This guy is so busted by the God he gave up on the other night, not that he deemed him God when he babbled the treason of that three-fold denial.



"Peace be with you," Jesus says. Then he shows them the wounds that authorize him to talk that crazy.

This is Gospel at its best and most gloriously impossible. Saul of Tarsus heard it too on the road to Damascus. It's the lion speaking with the lamb's voice. Or, better still, it's the lion and the lamb cavorting together the way Isaiah envisioned they would when the new age dawns, only it happens in a way even Isaiah couldn't begin to guess, in the astonishing person of Christ Jesus, the lamb laid low by the lion on the best and worst Friday ever, and this for committing the crime the lion sent him to commit. "He bore our sins," as we commonly say, rarely pausing as we do either to marvel at the wonder or to wallow in the riddle of what we've just confessed—how, for example, this lamb's obedience is to wear our disobedience, or how the very thing that makes him an eternally righteous lamb is the responsibility he takes for everything in me and you that drives the lion deadly crazy. Out come the claws that Friday. They pin him to the cross I belong on. So dies the only person ever to draw breath that a righteous lion can purr over, the purr erupting in earnest that first Easter Sunday and continuing this very morning to cheer the hearts of saints and angels. It does this even as Christ looks around at the flock of dopey ostriches huddled in this room, and says to us all, bar none, "Peace be with you." Peace, no matter that all of you are spending yet another day on earth irritating God, to say nothing of each other. Of course you are. That's what ostriches do. You can't keep from doing it, nor will you. Even so, peace be with you. *I* am what finally matters to God where you are concerned. Let me also be the one who finally matters to you where each other is concerned. In other words, love one other as I have loved you, and, finding each other in me, dare together to trust that the lion is purring even as you hear it roar. Oh, and while you're at it, don't forget to purr over each other, even when

you're feeling cross and cranky with each other.

Or to put all this another way: don't simply hear the Gospel.
Use the Gospel.

-to be continued