

Timothy F. Lull – In Memoriam

Colleagues,

There were giants in the earth—also in our own days. And one more has fallen, Timothy Lull. Tim was an internationally renowned and much published Luther scholar and president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (Berkeley, California) when he died last month at only 60 years of age. We pass on to you Richard Koenig's sermon from the memorial service for Tim held two weeks ago in the New England Synod of the ELCA. Richard E. Koenig is an ELCA pastor (ret.), living in Massachusetts. Koenig was campus pastor when Lull was a student at Williams College, Williamstown, Mass, and later his colleague in the ministry of the New England Synod of the ELCA beginning in 1972. Following Lull's departure from New England, the two continued collaborating on various theological projects. The last such joint venture was Lull's convocation lectures on Luther for the New England Synod in the fall of 2002. For those wishing to respond Koenig's e-address is RKo4551788@cs.com

Peace & Joy!

The ThTh Desk

In Memoriam

Timothy Frank Lull

John 21: 15-19

(Sermon preached at Grace Lutheran Church, Needham, Mass., June 11, 2003)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, especially you, Mary Carlton, Tim's beloved life partner and other members of Tim's immediate family.

The Word of God on which this sermon in memory of our dear brother, pastor, friend, teacher Timothy Lull is based is the Gospel chosen for this day, the final words of the Risen Christ as recorded in John's Gospel.

- 1. We are gathered here this morning to remember Timothy Frank Lull and give thanks to God for "giving us him to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth," as is said in the Burial Service. And difficult that is. He was such an amazing person, so full of life, of deep faith, dazzling scholarship, profound insights, delightful humor, incredible energy, infectious enthusiasm and unquenchable hope, whose compassion ran as far as his interests. Encounters with Tim were always interesting. You never knew what he would come up with or what new project he was undertaking. In all my life I have never known anyone whose instructions for his funeral service would begin with a request that at the collation afterwards only a quality brand of coffee be served. But that was Tim. He was one theologian who was fun to be with. When Christopher Lull called me with the news late the night Tim died I, like all of you, was stunned. I couldn't believe. I still find it difficult to grasp. His departure has left us all feeling empty. He was to preach my funeral sermon, not I his. Nevertheless,*

“dennoch,” as Tim’s teacher and conversation partner Martin Luther would say, we give thanks. In the mystery of God’s leading it was on June 11, 1972, in this very church that Tim was ordained into the Holy Ministry of Word and Sacrament of the Lutheran Church in America. He lists his vocation as one of the special gifts he thanks God for in the remarkable personal confession of faith he left us. It is that vocation and the way Timothy carried it out that I would lift up today as the ground for our thanksgiving as well as a source of renewal and strength for all Christians and fellow ministers of the Gospel with Tim.

- 2. In the Gospel for today the Risen Christ three times asks Peter “Do you love me?” The questions are painful for Peter as the one who had denied the Lord and deserted him. But the Lord puts them to Peter not to cause him pain but to rehabilitate him, restore him once again to the circle of his 12 disciples and make him a leader of apostolic mission. He had been called as a disciple on the shores of Galilee. Now he is recalled at the same place. But note what the Lord sees as the principal qualification for his call. It is his unqualified and undying love for the Lord Jesus. At one time he had said to Jesus, Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord, but Jesus did not depart but drew Peter to himself and held to him in forgiving love. Peter never forgot it. It is no wonder that the Epistle that bears Peter’s name has this message for first century Christians in Asia Minor:*

“Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy (1:8)”

- 3. I am tempted to say that Timothy Lull could have written*

those lines. In the sparkling conversations one had with him, one frequently heard testimony to his unabashed love for his Lord. It was a love engendered in him by the kind of home into which he was born, the son of Raymond and Ruth Lull, two devout Lutheran parents; a love that was taught him in the ministry of his home church, a congregation representing the faith and piety of the old Ohio Synod of the American Lutheran Church; and its pastor; a love instilled in him by the devoted Sunday School teachers to whom he often paid tribute; a love that he derived from Luther as Luther taught it in passages like the Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism. Tim did not speak of this love frivolously or in the manner of a cliché. It was foundational to his life and to his vocation. It carried him as a pastor. It continued on in his vocation as teacher of theology. He could master vast stretches of academic theology with ease. (The speed with which the man read dazzled me.) Yet his work was never mere academic exercise done in detachment from his personal faith—or the church! You can see his love for the Lord Jesus in the hymns, Scriptures, and prayers of this, the Service he himself drew up. Now that he has died, God is holding him up to us, all five-feet-two- inches of him, as one whom the Spirit led to say: Lord, you know that I love you. And when the word came to follow him to become a minister of the Gospel, he was one who responded yes as a pardoned sinner who loved that Lord.

4. Upon the Apostle Peter's rehabilitation and re-vocation, the Lord confers upon him special responsibility to shepherd the flock of God. Of course this passage became a battlefield for Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians in the sorry history of the Church. We don't hear much about this controversy today, which is a

blessing. That allows us to think of Peter's ministry with less distraction. What the Lord says to Peter here leads us to recall what he says to Peter at the last Supper in Luke 22. There Jesus forecasts his betrayal and death. The disciples are confused and protest. Jesus tells them ominously that Satan will sift them like wheat. Then Jesus turns directly to Peter and says:

"Simon, Simon, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (22:31)"

Strengthen your brothers? What did the Lord mean? Surely his words portended the time of persecution and discouragement that were to beset the early Christians and put them in desperate need of encouragement and hope. And encouragement and hope are what Peter gave them. His Epistle is known as the Epistle of Hope:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials. (1:3, 6)"

Again and again 1 Peter rings the changes on the theme of hope, hope for the brotherhood, as the KJ version has it in 2:17, in the NRSV, the family of believers, the Church. Peter is an apostle of hope to the Church.

- 5. A messenger of hope for the Church? Can anyone here fail to recognize Timothy Lull in that description? How he loved the Church, specifically and concretely, the Lutheran Church. Many of us found and still find it*

difficult to transfer our love for the branch of the Lutheran church in which we grew up to the ELCA. Who of us would say he or she loves the ELCA? The question might give us pause. Not Tim. His home was the old American Lutheran Church, but he was at home in whatever new configuration the Lutheran Church gave him to live and serve in. He loved the brotherhood, the family of believers. It seems that everyone he met in it became an instant friend. At times when I became discouraged or fearful about the Church and its future, I would call Tim. His take on events was never platitudinous or superficial. He saw the difficulties, yet never was ready to give up on the Church. I believe he never lost confidence in the Church because he never lost confidence in the Church's Lord and his promises.

6. His trait of hopeful realism was evident from the start of his ministry here in Needham. After he left to teach systematics at Philadelphia, from time to time he returned to speak to us, always as an apostle of hope. In 1993 the New England Lutheran Clergy Association invited Tim up from Philadelphia to address us on "American Lutheranism's Calling in the Present Crisis." (The title has a familiar sound to it, doesn't it?) Later he went around the Church with a message on "The Vocation of Lutheranism" in which he calmly looked at the possibility of a smaller Lutheran church, yet a church ever and even more vigorous and fruitful in mission. He came to us last year again to speak on Luther. He portrayed for us a resilient Luther who followed severe trials with incredible bursts of creative energy. From his study of Luther Tim fashioned the vision of a resilient Lutheran Church, the title of the series he was writing for The Lutheran magazine. Rather than finding Luther a wooden hero and Lutheranism an ethnic artifact and its

confessions historical baggage, to be trashed, ignored, or discarded, he saw Lutheranism in possession of "the ability to bounce back even from very severe troubles," drawing on its powerful themes like Law and Gospel, the theology of the Cross, the doctrine of the two kingdoms, along with justification by faith. Tim is the sufficient model for what our Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has called for us to be: faithful yet changing.

7. Tim's Lutheranism provided him with the center for his ministry. In 1981 I asked Tim to write an article for PARTNERS magazine which I was editing at the time. We discussed a problem that we both felt was plaguing the church as it faced vigorous challenges by Fundamentalist forms of Christianity on the right and radical revisions of Christian faith by churches on the left or translations of the Gospel into various forms of therapy in attempts to make the Gospel "relevant." Among the ranks of the clergy there seemed to be confusion over what we were finally about. In his article Tim wrote:

"In these days when so many religious groups have learned to be assertive, I am often challenged as to whether I have any real center to my ministry. . . . Yes, there is a center. I am chiefly a minister of Word and Sacrament. I am one who above all else is charged to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who receive it. I am a bringer of forgiveness. And I know where that vision of my ministry comes from. Its major source is my own life experience within the Lutheran Church [from] the Augsburg Confession [and] Luther." . . . People may not be asking for forgiveness But it is what we have. And it is clear to me that we have nothing better--and perhaps nothing else--to offer to the pain of the world in our day."

The forgiveness of sins. Not an undifferentiated or abstract "God's love," or even "introducing people to Jesus Christ." Those terms by themselves do not cut it. God's love, yes, but love as grace from God for the undeserving. Jesus Christ, yes, but Christ as the one who suffered and died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins of a humankind that has gone astray (1 Peter 2:24 and 25).

- 8. The mysterious scene of Peter's rehabilitation ends on a shocking note. What will Peter get in return for his love, for his willingness to follow Christ, for his shepherding of the flock, for his strengthening of his brothers? He is to be taken prisoner. No longer allowed to go where he wills to the churches of Asia Minor. No longer to preach. Be led away to be put to death. He was crucified, tradition has it, head down because he did not think he was worthy to be crucified in the same position as his Lord. Some Lord! It is an appalling scene. Yet, the text says, Jesus says this to Peter "to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God." Death by crucifixion a way to glorify God?*
- 9. It's a baffling, sometimes terrifying, God we have to believe in. Although not taken and made a martyr, Tim died a nasty death, cut down at the peak of his career. What a way to be dealt with! One could make a case that as horrifying as Peter's death was, there was a glory to it. It was a death made as the result of a confession of faith in Christ before the world. But Tim's death came as the result of a blood clot, in a hospital, practically alone. Did Tim glorify God in that death? Yes, says the Scripture and Christian tradition. The death of every faithful believer in whatever form it occurs glorifies God. For in the believer's death, faith triumphs over*

death as it claims a portion in God's deed in the raising of Jesus Christ, the inheritance that is imperishable, and undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us, as 1 Peter declares. That is why Christians can greet death as did Tim. Look at this Liturgy. There is no whining or hand-wringing. There is only joy, a joy born of confidence that by the amazing grace of God a poor sinner would be granted the joy of seeing God face to face. Once again Tim's word would be Luther's word, "dennoch," nevertheless, I will continue to believe and set my hope in Christ in spite of all. And God is glorified.

10. Timothy Lull's life and work summon us to give thanks to God and elicit from us thanksgiving to God for all that he was for us and all that he continues to give us in his legacy as a person, pastor and professor. Nathan Soderblom [Patriarch of the 20th century Lundensian school of Luther scholarship] once said that Christians are to be people who make it easier for other people to believe in God. Timothy Lull's life and work make it easier for us to believe and trust God, centered as they were in Christ and the promise of God. Timothy Lull's life and work challenge us all, especially pastors, to live by our confession, to let our ministries flow from it, to be loyal to it in a time of testing as we are going through, to articulate the forgiving grace of God clearly and convincingly, to lift the hungry heart and maximize the grace of God in the face of sin and sorrow.
11. "O God, it is a fearful thing to see the human soul take wing," wrote Lord Byron. And that is true as we see it from the outside, as it were. Death cannot be prettified or painted over by human contrivance. But seen from the perspective of the Risen Christ we can speak even of that fearful moment differently. One of the greatest hymns from our Lutheran heritage, "Jerusalem, Thou City Fair

and High," speaks our hope as it pictures the soul of the Christian in these beautiful lines of the third stanza. By grace we can imagine Tim's sudden passing this way:

*A moment's space, and gently, wondrously,
Released from earthly ties,
Elijah's chariot bears her up to thee,
Through all these lower skies
To yonder shining regions
While down to meet her comes
The blessed angel legions
And bid her welcome home.*

Thus it was, we are sure, for Timothy Lull. Rest well, brother Tim, confessor and teacher of the Church, and thank you. Thank you, Mary Carlton, for sharing him with us. Thank you, dear Lord Jesus Christ. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Richard E. Koenig