

Two Letters 1: Out of Africa – Some Observations 2: How ugly evil is!

Colleagues,

The text for ThTh #117 is two letters just arrived from South Africa.

First letter comes from Art and Mitzi Preisinger, ELCA mission volunteers. Art and I were seminary classmates in the 1950s. The Preisingers did campus ministry for a good long while, and in more recent years Art taught theology at Texas Lutheran University (Seguin TX). He retired last year, freeing them up to be in S. Africa this year.

Second one is from Dave and Darlene Schneider. Lutheran Theological Seminary Enhlanhleni, also in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. Earlier this summer Dave gave us ThTh 108 (July 6, 2000) on the topic of Church Discipline.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

LETTER #1

Sun, 27 Aug 2000

Subject: Out of Africa – Some Observations

Dear Ed,

We have about a month to go before we return to the States. It will then have been about five months that we have been working at the Lutheran Seminary at Umpumulo, South Africa, in the province of Kwazulu-Natal. The provincial name tells you that we are in an area the majority of whose population is Zulu,

although there are large groups of Indians nearby – Stanger, 40 kms. away (total pop. 220,000) and Durban, 90 kms. (total pop. over 1 million). [Ed's note: Both cities are on S. Africa's southeastern coast overlooking the Indian Ocean.] Zulu is the main language spoken by the seminary staff, the workers, and the people of the nearby village. Students' primary languages include Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, Setswana, Venda, Afrikaans. During class breaks, the "quad" is Babel redivivus. Most of the students are South African, but a few come from other parts of southern Africa: Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

The language division bespeaks social division as well, particularly vis-a-vis the few colored [=mixed race] students from S.Africa's Western and Northern Cape provinces and the black students. The former generally gravitate socially toward the couple of colored lecturers and the colored staff librarian, who themselves, since they do not speak Zulu, pretty much socialize among themselves. Apartheid lives.

Recently you remarked that a sermon from an ELCA pulpit which you had heard contained little or no gospel; that in fact even the Name was not named. This concerned you. Well, here the name is named a lot, usually with adjectives (wonderful, Lord, savior, etc.). Often when students read the scripture lesson in chapel they preface the reading with "I read in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." Trinity? All over the place, many students crossing themselves at the appropriate invocation. (Note: They refuse to say Holy "Ghost." They will always and only say or sing Holy "Spirit." This is sometimes amusing when it comes to, e.g., the last two lines of the Common Doxology.)

If it is true that "cantat bis orant " [the one who sings is praying twice] these folk pray up a storm. They worship here probably more than all the ELCA seminaries put together: morning and evening, Sunday through Friday. Weekly Eucharist.

Worship is a curious mixture of high church and low church. There is a kind of piety around here some of which could be profitably emulated stateside, although the ten or so nineteenth-century sentimental hymns they sing over and over wear thin.

But all this does not mean we are always hearing gospel. Beating people over the head with the cross is not gospel proclamation. What sounds like gospel, the Name being named notwithstanding, is often disguised law. Wife Mitzi, working in the library, ran across a 1975 article in a Festschrift for one O.G. Myklebust . [Ed's note: Olav Guttorm Myklebust was born 1905, ordained in 1930 and sent to S. Africa by the Norwegian Missionary Society. He taught at Umpumulo—where Preisinger's now are—and beginning in 1934 was its principal.]

This article by the then first black rector of the Seminary, Douglas Duma L. Makhathani is titled "The Lutheran Church in Kwa-Zulu: Then and Now." Makhathini says that the white missionaries wanted "to establish a self-supporting, self-propagating, self-administrating Lutheran Church among the Zulus and kindred tribes, preserving their characteristic traits as far as possible." He notes that the missionaries wanted some kind of separate development by "preserving their (Zulus' et al.) characteristic traits as far as possible," and yet they (the missionaries) remove all characteristic traits (customs, traditions and practice) "by means of laws and ordinances – as was the case in the planting of the gospel..."

He goes on: "I believe that the Gospel, rightly preached is able to direct people in relation to what they should be or become better than having to direct them with man made ordinances and rules. . . . If the Gospel were permitted to go its own way I am convinced it would have produced stronger and more stable Christians. You see, Zulu people (read everybody,

all humanity, Luther would say) are people of law and obedience. This they well understand. It remains to be seen whether or not missions succeeded to evangelize with the Gospel. It is crystal clear that making church people legalistic was a great success. . . . Lutheran missionary aims, I am sure, were never those of building legalistic Christian communities. They aimed at building Evangelical Communities. Because they (missionaries) were not aware of a Zulu's inclination to the law and his love of the law, their innocent efforts yielded legalism and a bad mixing of law and gospel to this day."

[Does that sound like some Lutheranism you and I know stateside?]

The library here is fairly extensive. Foreign, mostly American, groups, churches, pastors, etc., have donated books, probably many they didn't want. Many books from our Missouri Synod days. CPH stuff. Quite a few nineteenth and early twentieth century books, conservative, some to the point of fundamentalistic, on the shelves. One could let them moulder there, except that students use them, imbibe them, then regurgitate it back in their papers. One is tempted to play Philip and ask, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" But whether they understand it fully or not, the groundwork has been laid for a conservative, law-oriented approach to Lutheranism.

As you well know, one of the biggest problems in southern Africa is the AIDS epidemic. When we came to Umpumulo, AIDS was an issue rarely talked about. I think that has changed, maybe not dramatically, but to a considerable degree. One of the reasons for the high incidence of AIDS (and several students have died because of it) is the promiscuity of African males and the myths about AIDS, e.g., the statistics are inflated to make blacks look bad, or, one can cure AIDS by sleeping with a

virgin (consequently, very young females, many in their very early teens, are bedded and often impregnated). Other myths: "if you eat more than five times a day you will not get AIDS"; "you won't get AIDS if you are circumcised"; "AIDS is caused by witchcraft"; "only homosexuals get AIDS."

There is a high incidence of rape because many African males feel it is their right to sleep with whomever they please. If the female does not consent, she is raped. And the morality of condom use is hotly debated in the church. The word "cultural" gets used a lot to justify certain activities. Thus, "Why is that guy beating up that woman?" "It's OK, it's cultural." Shaka [Ed's note: Zulu chief, 1816-28, founder of southern Africa's Zulu empire, who created a fighting force that devastated the entire region] did a superb con job on Zulu women: men are made to protect women; women are made for everything else – intense labor, bearing children, cooking, cleaning, polishing floors on their hands and knees, carrying heavy things on their heads, etc. ad infinitum.

It has been a rich and varied experience, not only due to the fine hospitality of our hosts, the faculty, and the students, but also because of the beautiful area in which Umpumulo is situated and, for the most part, great weather. So God answered the fourth petition of the prayer his Son taught us—and as Luther's Catechism interprets it—God gave us "good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."

Joy and peace,
Art and Mitzi Preisinger

On Monday, Sept. 4, came this postscript—

On the first Sunday of the month no Sunday morning (7:30 a.m.) Eucharist is held in the Umpumulo seminary chapel. Rather,

students are enjoined to attend the “parish church,” about 2 kms. distant. So today, the first Sunday we were able to do this, we attended.

The service was fascinating. Dr. Biyela, rector of the seminary, preached and presided. All in Zulu, except the sermon was partly English. Biyela is a good preacher. A good storyteller. Fluent in at least three languages. Sermon was gospel – based on Ephesians 2.

But the liturgy! They like vestments here. Biyela processed in cope. Then took it off and wore alb and stole. Then chasuble for the celebration. Incense like mad. They censed the altar, the Bible, and even the chairs brought to the chancel by students. These were white plastic chairs, the kind you can get for about \$7-8 in the patio section of US supermarkets when spring rolls around. Apparently the sem was gifting the parish with them. There is a kind of Ladies Aid, I think they call it the Women’s League, and they wear a “uniform”–black dress with white collar and white cap that looks something like a U.S. navy sailor’s hat. The Methodist women wear red and white, the Anglican purple and white [what else?] and sit together. There were about 75 of these women. Quite a sight. Service lasted almost three hours.

LETTER #2

August 2000

Dear Ed,

What a mystery evil is! It is so twisted and ugly–especially when sitting beside the good and the beautiful. We had a beautiful Bible study in our home late last month. My heart was full of admiration as white South African farmers were willing

to look seriously at the hard words of James 5:1-6. "Have we oppressed our workers?" "Is our relative wealth based on their poverty?" "Have we paid them proper wages?"

God's law was working. "Yes, we will be judged. We have done our best as we see it, but will it be enough to satisfy our Lord, who is standing at the doors, ready to come in judgment?"

But His Gospel was also strong. The coming Judge is "compassionate and merciful. He is the same One who died to save us."

"But, you know, some of us might have judgment before others," I said, thinking that Darlene and I were about the oldest people in the room. "Actually Judgment Day for me is the day I die." "Yes, indeed!" (Nods of agreement around the circle.) A beautiful, honest, blessed discussion.

After one of Darlene's great desserts and warm personal words of sharing back and forth, they all left and we put our living room back into everyday shape.

Going home after the study, Ronald and Ella approached their house and farm, at the end of the road, near the Buffalo River. Even though it was now about 9:30 p.m., they weren't too surprised to see a car there, for someone had earlier borrowed the key for a gate, to visit some friends who lived on the property. The men in the car needed some water for their overheated radiator. Then they asked for a drink of water.

As Ronald handed the water to him, a gun appeared in the hand of the man reaching to receive it. He shot Ronald in the face, killing him instantly. The group then forced Ella to open the safes, so they could take documents and the money kept there, for paying the farm workers the next day. They locked her in a bedroom, then thoroughly looted the whole house.

How ugly evil is!

And it works still more evil. The murderous looters were black men. When other such people have been challenged, they have said that they are reacting against the apartheid oppression of the past.

Of course the white farming community reacts to the murder. Some have ugly, racist words: "You can't trust any blacks! See what they're doing to us farmers. They won't be satisfied until we are all dead."

Evil begets more evil.

The funeral last Sunday was really something. About 500 people crowded into and around the small rural church building. Many black people hovered around the edges, having come to show their respect and love for the bereaved family.

We all expected the widow and her only daughter Marit to be "basket cases," paralyzed with grief and anger. Don't underestimate the power of God's loving salvation, as we did. Widow and daughter were towers of strength. They spoke of their loss but also of God's blessings. Their faces were ready to smile and to discuss other things, including their future plans. They intend to keep the farm and work it, with Marit and her husband Eric on the scene.

You didn't see it, but can you believe it? Exactly as it is written in Romans: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign [more powerfully], to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Our fellow-Christian farmers, also present at the Bible study, tried to catch the criminals on the back roads. They were too

late. But they reported a shower of stars, magnificently filling the night sky, as they stood on the gravel. Their conclusion: a heavenly celebration, welcoming friend Ronald home.

David and Darlene Schneider