

Unearthing Gospel Gold—the Essay, Part I

Colleagues,

We've been away, though not loafing. My co-editor, Carol Braun, was busy serving the Lord last week by bringing her first child into the Lord's world. Solomon Porter Zimansky was born on February 7. Mother and son are both well, God be praised. Carol is presently on maternity leave, also from Thursday Theology.

As for me, I've been busy first with preps for last month's Crossings seminar (see below), then with the seminar itself, then with the catch-up work that was waiting when I got back to the congregation I serve in Fairview Park, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. I can name some remarkable people who would handle this and Thursday Theology without breaking a sweat, but I'm not one of them. This leaves me inevitably in debt to all of you for your patience. It's been almost a month since the last post. I hope to put together another weekly string that will take you up to Holy Week. Expect another hiatus when that gets here.

This week's offering is the first section of an essay I delivered on the opening night of the recent seminar, the boosting of which was the subject of our last post. Since the writing of this kept me from refreshing your inboxes a couple of weeks ago, let me share it with you now, with part two following next week. The full, unbroken version will appear at some point on the Crossings website, along with a few other seminar presentations. Look under the Library tab, then click "Conference Papers," then "2015 papers" at such time as the latter link appears.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Unearthing Gospel Gold: Remarks on What It Is, and How to Find It

At the 2015 Crossings Seminar
Shrine of our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois
Sunday, January 25, 7:00 p.m.

by Jerome Burce, D. Min.

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There is gold; and then there's fool's gold. There is Gospel; and then there's faux gospel. I wish I could take credit for that phrase, faux gospel, but I can't. I stole it from my Crossing colleague, Marcus Felde, who, with several others, plans to spend tomorrow helping you, among other things, to refine and calibrate your faux gospel detectors so that you won't be taken in by rubbish and can bless the people in your lives with the real thing instead.

And isn't that exactly why you're here, not for your own sake, but for the sake of the people God has filled your lives with to overflowing? Some of you call some of them parishioners; or you call them fellow members of the church I go to. Or you call them children, or friends, or co-workers, or neighbors. Or you call them the lady behind the counter at the corner store, or the kid who mows my lawn.

And let's by no means forget the ones you refer to as passersby, or strangers. That includes the jerk who cut you off on the freeway the other day, and the aromatic fellow who shook a tattered paper cup at you when you got downtown. "You crazy dirt

bag"—that's the thought, or something like it, that tripped across your mind when he did it. Being raised as you were, you kept your mouth shut and didn't say it, of course; but being born as you were, you sure enough did think it, and with the thought came a little flush of satisfaction, perhaps, that you, for one, were honest enough to admit that you were thinking it; and really why shouldn't you think it, what's the point in being less than blunt about these not so pleasant human specimens that all of us can't help but stumble over as we pick our daily paths through this broken, sinful world.

Add to this the thought that God the Holy Spirit might well appreciate this bluntness. Why shouldn't he, I ask. After all, it relieves him of the hassle of having to slice through a hide of false piety, than which few hides are more resistant to the two-edged sword the Spirit wields. That hide lies thickest on the baptized likes of us. We went to Sunday School. We've sat in church. We know the Lord's command to love your neighbor as yourself. We're well beyond the common folly that hears this as nothing more than a lovely sentiment, to be taken or left according to each one's discretion. No, we say. When the Lord says "love," the Lord means "love," and since loving that shaker of the tattered cup is not compatible with calling him a dirt bag, therefore I dare not, therefore I will not, therefore I do not; and if any should suggest that I so much as entertain such thoughts, I'll deny it to their faces. What a pain this must be for the Spirit, Holy and Righteous, as he reads the wrinkled nose, the slight flinch of the hand as I extend it toward the cup with a quarter or two, no more than that, I cannot know if the fellow will use it to buy another binge on Thunderbird or whatever other rotgut stuff the down-and-out are using to get drunk on these days. Far be it from me to abet his happiness in depravity.

"Gotcha," says the Spirit, who tells us also not to judge

lest we be judged—yet judging is what we do. We do it because we've got to do it, we cannot help but do it; reaching conclusions about the other, be these studied or snap, is as intrinsic to life in this world as breathing, or the steady pounding of a heart. All of you are doing it with me, right now, as I stand here talking, and you can rest assured that I'll return the favor later when I'm listening to you, in whatever venue that listening should happen. And for me there's again that glint of pleasure, the little thrill of satisfaction, in observing this; in taking the risk with all of you of pointing it out.

"You crazy dirt bag," says the Spirit, as he catches my thoughts—yours too, perhaps; though being the Spirit, he tends as a rule to say this more elegantly. For example, "all flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flowers of the field," etc. I mention this parenthetically for now, with the further observation, also in parentheses, that while human flesh glories in much, there is nothing it glories in more than its god-like status as a knower of good and evil. Behold the toddler asserting her right to decide whether Mommy, in pressing her to eat her carrots, is talking sense or spouting drivel; and if Mommy thinks the carrot fight is tough, wait till the tattoo question comes screaming through the door in a decade or so. In that day watch Mommy scratch her head in bewilderment as she wonders how somebody she formed, shaped, and raised could ever think to want a tattoo. Or to put this more precisely, what she wonders is how this child of hers could insist on finding worth where there is no worth, attaching value to something that serves in fact to devalue, as Dear Daughter, if she gets her way, is bound to discover in a few years time when she's out there trying to land the first real job, the one with semi-decent pay and benefits. Not that Mom gets anywhere by pointing this out now, not when Daughter

glories so stubbornly in the divine right of the newly minted teen to know so very much better than her elders ever have, or ever will.

Parenting, I sometimes think, was designed by God in part to force the bilious taste of his own consternation down our stubborn, willful throats. He formed us. He shaped us. He calls us his own. And not a day goes by when he doesn't catch each of us reveling in rubbish and turning up our snotty noses at things that he holds precious and dear.

And yes, this is true of us all. Again the episode we started with: two baptized sons of God Most High, gone down to the city to go about their business, are accosted by a beggar. The one is pious, the other is not. The one drops coins, the other brushes by. The one prays, "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other so-called Christians. I stop. I drop. I love my neighbor—I do, I do." And the other: "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other so-called Christians, so silly in their piety, so self-deluded. I know my faults, my limits. I tell it like it is, with eyes wide open."

And in so praying—I'm speaking here of fleeting prayer, the kind that skitters through the mind, all but unnoticed, though always caught by the One who catches every thought—in that praying, each man has an admiring eye on something inside him, something about him, that rivets his attention. Really, it isn't much—a speck of something, nothing more; but even so it glints. It gleams. It makes him happy. Spotting it, he feels the glow of a certain worth that other people lack.

Ah, the glow. Some of you drink whiskey; some do not. Those who do are familiar with the glow that not only warms, it addles the wits. This is that kind of glow. Before you know it, two people who have waded in the Word of God their whole lives long

are being swept away in the primordial madness that expects Almighty God, Holy and Righteous, to take his cues from sinners. So as I sneak a second glance at the glint that caught my eye, I expect God's eye to follow mine, and catch it too—that much it surely does, it always does. But more, I also expect that God will see the thing as I see it and name it as I name it; and in the name that I use to describe it—a spark of loving intention, if I'm the pietist, a flash of gruff courageous honesty, if I'm the other guy—in that name you'll hear everything you need to know about my own assessment of what I've found. It's a fleck—a grain or two, if nothing more—of glorious gold. God's kind of gold. We often call that gold by its other name: righteousness.

God likes this gold, of course. God seems in fact to have an insatiable thirst for it. He certainly demands it. Open to most any page in the Bible and you'll find him saying so. Listen to any preacher today who takes the Bible seriously and they'll say it too, as indeed they should—shame on them if they don't. Can you blame me, then, for being thrilled to have found this speck of it inside me, and after that for being eager that God should see it too?

“Not so fast,” says the Lord, using tones the mother mimics as she weighs in on the merits of the teen's tattoo. And again the Lord says, here leaning on his poet: “All that glitters is not gold.” After that the punch line, doing double duty as a punch in the gut—God's own words now: “Dust you are, and only dust, returning to dust: and to think you dared to think this little fleck of shiny whatever intermingled with the dust-you-are would somehow impress me,” says the Lord. “And you called him a crazy dirt bag?”

Really, what else is the Lord to say in this moment of our scenario as he watches a pair of his baptized agents refusing to extend anything approaching genuine love to their neighbor,

the smelly beggar—will either try to engage the creature in any kind of conversation, let alone the kind that acknowledges him as a fellow human being, are you kidding?—and still they find a way to preen as they walk away from their encounter with him.

Have they forgotten what they heard as recently as Christmas Eve, that God has a surprising fondness for uncouth, dirty, hopeless and going-absolutely-nowhere specimens of human garbage that nobody else can find the faintest scrap of value in? Seriously, one reason shepherds abided in the field is that city-dwellers couldn't abide them. But it's these to whom the angel comes, and of all the dead to be raised to life by the Word of God in the angel's mouth, they are the first. "Fear not. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord."

So tell me, who's worth what in that encounter on our downtown city street?

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Time to pause and get our bearings.

What you've heard from me so far is an example of the kind of analysis that Cathy Lessmann is going to walk you through at length tomorrow morning—not the whole analysis in this example so far, but only the first part. I'll leave Part Two for discussion later, if we get to it. For now I want to take you behind the curtain for a peek at the machinery, the set of fundamental assumptions that are driving the rest of what's spilling out of me tonight, and will gush from Cathy tomorrow.

I should mention, by the way, that Cathy's work with you will focus squarely on Scriptural texts, and how to read them. I've been zeroed in so far on reading a real-life situation, with bits and pieces of Scripture dancing in the background and egging me on. In doing that, I've put the cart ahead of

the horse—do pardon the cliché, the third, I think, in about as many sentences—and that’s the chief reason for hitting the pause button (cliché #4) to examine why I’m thinking the way I am, and why I’m urging you to think that way too; and if it strikes you that my urging is intense tonight, wait till Cathy gets hold of you tomorrow—Cathy whose calling is not to preach, but to listen to preachers, which, over a lifetime, is also to suffer from preachers, too many of whom fail to deliver what Cathy will tell you she absolutely needs them to deliver, at least one nugget per sermon of pure Gospel gold.

Faux Gospel doesn’t cut it. Faux Gospel at its best can be very attractive and full of yellow sparkle, but really, for all its prettiness, it’s nothing more than a lump of iron that weighs you down and leaves you dead broke.

So my first and major task with you tonight is to define terms. Above all, what is Gospel, and what is not? I’m going to spend almost all my remaining time with you tonight on this, and we will dig deeply.

At the end, as a postscript of sorts, I’m going to pass along a couple of essential tools for reading the Bible. These come from Lutheran confessors of the 16th century, who realized that century upon century of shabby reading and poor interpretation had obscured the rich veins of Gospel God has put there for the benefit of dead broke sinners. So the first tool is a pickax of sorts, designed to break the gold loose from the material that surrounds it. The second is a touchstone, the tool one uses to test for the real thing—genuine Gospel as opposed to the faux versions that are still seducing eyes and hearts today.

So that’s the outline for the next several minutes. Let’s get to it, starting with that key word, “Gospel.”

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Gospel means “good news.” You all know that. I wish there was a handy synonym for this, but there isn’t, and that’s too bad. In today’s English the word “Gospel” is opaque, and the phrase “good news” has gotten limp and weak through overuse. An imaginary newsflash of the sort we hear every day on the radio: “The Bureau for Consumer Awareness announced today that the cost of hamburger will increase next week to \$8 a pound, but the good news is that gas prices continue to slide.” Really, good news? Ho hum at best, I should think, and not good at all if I’m a serious fan of red meat.

I sometimes wonder if these everyday speech habits haven’t set us up to settle also in church for good news that really isn’t, and for gospel, little “g”, that’s as faux as faux can be. St. Paul would call these “other gospels”—not, he says, that there is another gospel, or in Paul’s first century people’s Greek, another euaggelion. That’s something good (eu-) delivered by an angel, a messenger. A good message, you might say. Or sharper still, a good announcement.

I assume the first century world, like ours, was awash in euaggelia, people popping up in the town square week by week to announce that the legions had clobbered the Parthians again in the latest kerfuffle out east, or that our own Pythias, the prefect’s son, had just won third place in the discus throw at the all-Macedonia tryouts for next year’s Olympic Games

Paul, by contrast, is extraordinarily stingy with euaggelion as a word. To know the story of his conversion—some of us heard it again in church this morning—is to understand why. There he is, face down in the dust of the Damascus highway, squirming as the shepherds squirmed in the dirt of their Bethlehem fields, only now it’s not an angel talking, it’s the risen Christ, the one who sits at God’s right hand as the Ultimate Judge, beyond

whom there is absolutely no appeal, not even to the Father. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And again, "I am Jesus," ego eimi Iesous, where ego eimi, "I am," is the God-name that Moses learned about at the burning bush, as Saul of Tarsus knows only too well. So he squirms again. What else can he do as he waits for the lightening bolt to split his spine wide open from neck to tail bone?

Only then the words—two words, I think, sometimes three in English—that must have stuck forever after in Paul's memory and been for him the touchstone of what is euaggelion, and what is not. Here's what Saul heard: "But get up." Greek has two words for the conjunction "but," a little but, de, and a big but, alla. This is the big but, the huge but, the great "alla" hinge on which the door to an unthinkably impossible future suddenly swings open. The voice of Christ: "Don't lie there as the worthless dirt bag you are and the mangled corpse you ought to be. But get up." Arise, if you will. "And getting up, start taking those first toddling steps into a new life, a sudden and astonishing existence of inexpressibly high quality and value, a golden Easter life, impervious to rust and rot and corruption and death, and it's yours as sheer gift. Not a speck of it have you earned. To the contrary. All you've managed to do is to dis-earn it. But, even so, get up. Get going. Enjoy your golden life and give it a righteous whirl. And that's exactly what Paul will do. God's word insists that he's still doing it.

Later on Paul will famously feature this great "alla" hinge in his letter to the Romans, 3:21: "But now, aside from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, the kind that makes its startling appearance through faith in Christ Jesus." We'll talk soon about how St. Mark in particular depicts this appearance. My point for the moment is simply that, where Paul is concerned, nothing short of a word this huge and magnificent can qualify for the term euaggelion. "Good news"

doesn't cut it anymore as an adequate English equivalent. Nor does plain old "gospel," for that matter. So I propose—not that anyone anywhere will bother to listen—that we whose business it is to pass God's euaggelion along to other English speakers today might do well to inflate our terminology the way you've heard me do it once so far this evening. Cathy doesn't go to church on Sunday to hear "the Gospel". She goes instead for that weekly nugget of pure Gospel gold. Let's say it like that. Let's make ourselves remember that she goes there for nothing less than the inexpressible gift of God that turns dirt bags into golden children. And so do you.

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Enter then the concept of golden children. Another term for these is "saints." Paul uses this term in all but one of the letters he writes to churches. The exception is his letter to the Galatians. This shouldn't surprise us. Nor should the tone that also sets the letter apart, both angry and anguished. The Galatians, after all, are trading in their Gospel gold for glitzy iron junk, a stupid move that succeeding waves of Christians have kept making in all the centuries since. I wish I could find a way to keep people in the congregation I serve, teenagers in particular, from drifting off to places that peddle this rubbish as a matter of course. If any of you have some clues about this, tell me later.

I need to say some more about this junk so we all understand what I'm talking about. Most of you, I'm sure, are guessing already, and guessing quite rightly.

The junk is the value that human beings, addicted from birth to notions of self-worth, are driven endlessly to accumulate for themselves. They measure that value in countless ways. Money is a biggie, of course. So is beauty, fame, and fitness. So is prowess—athletic, academic, entrepreneurial, the list goes on. I

think power is the most important thing we use to measure value by. That's in part because the person or party with power is able to jiggle the scales that measure what value is. They're also able to act in ways that either increase or decrease the value of others, as, for example, when Hitler sends his Wehrmacht into Poland, or when a boss promotes one employee and fires another.

In passing, when a person has built up value in whatever specie to an amount that she finds satisfying, she'll say of herself, "I'm all right." "All right" is the street English way of saying "righteous." God is never impressed when he hears people carrying on about their self-certified all-rightness. In fact he makes it a point to prove them all wrong, as the wealthy farmer found out in the parable Jesus told. "You fool," God says (Luke 12:20), and this of course is the same God who takes to laughing when the kings of the earth start strutting their stuff (Psalm 2:4).

Yet here's where it gets interesting in a painful sort way, so painful that even theologians—lots of them—refuse to face it. It's against these teachers, by the way, that Paul is squaring off in Galatians. Martin Luther will do the same in his day with the likes of Johannes Eck, and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Between them sits Augustine, contesting with Pelagius.

The point of painful interest is that God who mocks the value we accumulate has all along been pushing us to go for it. What's more, he's given us the structures we use to define value, and the mechanisms that build it up. The rich farmer is rich only because God has made his fields productive. The kings strut because God has filled their little fiefdoms with the wherewithal to pay an army. The mother crowing on Facebook about her righteous children is crowing only because she's been busy doing what God requires all mothers to do,

caring for her children, and loving them, and helping them to grow and prosper into Facebook-worthy children. To do such things is the law of motherhood, inscribed on every mother's heart, whether they want it there or not. Most do. Most take it simply for granted. The same is true for most every other person when it comes to the laws appropriate to them in their particular vocations, the worker that he should work, the employer that he should pay the worker, the student that she should study and get her papers done on time, said time defined by a professor who's busy obeying the law of professors to draw the best they can from their students in a timely fashion.

Beneath these laws lurk other laws, the general ones—ten by one reckoning, and by another two: love God; love your neighbor. That said, don't give your heart to lesser powers, don't do the core things that hurt your neighbor. All this too is etched in every human mind and heart, so deeply and thoroughly that I've never understood why we need to have fights about whether to post the Ten Commandments on courthouse lawns. Why bother? Show me the thief who, in your opinion, doesn't already know how wrong it is to steal. I'll prove otherwise. I'll prove it by stealing something from him. And when he yelps—or swings for my head, as the case may be—in that moment we'll see again how the law against stealing is, like all those other laws, embedded in the very operation of the world as we know it. It's not for nothing that the prophets call on us to name and honor it as the word of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Not a golden word, but a word of iron, hard, tough, rigid, inescapable, designed expressly for the children of Adam and Eve who, from God's perspective, are anything but golden. "There is no one who is righteous, no not one." That's Paul, quoting Psalm 14 in his final descent to the great hinge moment of Romans 3. Riffing on that thought we might once again observe how every human being is born to be a thief, and the gold

they have their fingers on is God's gold, known otherwise, again, as God's righteousness, a quality—a privilege—that begins and ends with God's right to say what's right and what is not right. But the moment we touch that gold it turns to poisonous lead. "Their eyes were opened," as it says, "and they saw that they were naked." At which point, looking down, he asserted his right to admire what he saw, and then he heard her snicker because she, asserting her right, was finding him ridiculous. Later the toddler will kick about the carrots, and the silly girl will sneak away one night to get the tattoo, and as in the garden, so now in the house, so also in the whole wide world, there is misery, and there is wrath. That's what happens when sinners grab for golden rights that don't belong to them.

Iron is God's first response to this mess. Let's not despise iron. It isn't pretty, but it has its uses. From it you can build the structures that control the thieving multitudes and keep them from the instant ruin they'd come to otherwise. You can also fashion the instruments that restrict and punish when the thieving gets out of hand. Iron, God's iron, is the element that fortifies the agreements sinners reach about what is right and wrong for everybody. Without such agreements—cultural, legal, political—we wouldn't cooperate, and we simply couldn't live. Sinai is the story of God himself devising an iron-clad agreement—a covenant, as we like to say—to shape and govern life for a particular set of thieving sinners; though in the preamble to that he clarifies the iron principles—again, those Ten Commandments—that govern life for every group of thieving sinners. And when they flout these principles, back comes the iron, God's iron, this time as the essential component of things like swords and pistols and police cruisers, and the razor wire that surrounds the prison yard.

Here's the one thing God's iron doesn't do. It doesn't change the sinner. It doesn't drive the thieving impulse from my

heart. It doesn't kill my urge to grab the gold—God's right to say what's right—and to claim this as my own. If anything it exacerbates it. That's the point that Paul, Augustine, and Luther, each in their own time, are wrangling over with their opponents. The idea has ever been, and still is today, that if I do what God says is right, then—guess what—I'll have the right to insist that God admit this. Again, "I thank thee, Lord, that I'm not like other men. See? See? Such pretty speckles your iron law has produced in me. Aren't you happy? And if you aren't, what's wrong with you?" Of course this is ludicrous. It's the student checking in at the professor's office to demand an A+ on that altogether righteous paper that he, the student, just knows that he has written. If I'm the prof I think I respond to the fellow's cheek by cutting his grade from B to C-, and then I send him packing.

Or if I'm Jesus, I tell the fellow to go sell everything he has and give it to the poor—to divest himself, that is, of all his worth, his own worth—and then come follow me. Maybe then, and only then, you'll get somewhere.

—to be continued.