

Why Jesus? Still a Problem in our ELCA

Colleagues,

Two items from “Higgins Road,” (the folksy name for the ELCA national headquarters @ 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago 60631), come in under that “Why Jesus?” rubric this week. One is a news release remembering the bloody business exactly one year ago at Virginia Tech Institute. That news release also recalls what our ELCA campus pastor at VTI did—and did not—proclaim as he spoke to a world audience immediately thereafter, and it reports on what has happened since then in campus ministry there.

Significant—both then and now—is the Christ-less-ness of all the prose.

You may remember that ThTh postings a year ago—eventually five of them—were “stuck” on how to speak Christ to the VTI apocalypse. Some of you even offered “Christ-full” re-writes of the “Christ-less” homily offered by our ELCA campus pastor. *[If interested, GO to the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> and click on Thursday Theology 2007. It begins with the April 19 posting—and then four of the next six thereafter.]*

Second item for the “Why Jesus?” topic is some correspondence I’ve had with editorial people of THE LUTHERAN, the ELCA’s official monthly journal. I’ve been complaining to them almost every month since a series started running in THE LUTHERAN—a series called OUR FAITH—that it was not proclaiming “our” LUTHERAN faith at all, namely, the one articulated in the Lutheran Confessions. Despite my “compelling” arguments, the series continues. So I stopped gritching and “re-wrote” the OUR

FAITH text in the April issue and sent it to the editor. Couple days later I got “really feisty” (for the first time, of course!) and proposed an entire 12-month series as an Op Ed to the series currently running.

A second-echelon editor responded: “Send us a sample of what you have in mind, preferably on one title you propose in the series: ‘Why Jesus?’” So I did. In two versions—as St. Paul answered the question, as Martin Luther answered the question. And I did get a response, but I can’t tell if they are really interested or not.

So Herewith the documents on both of these items from the ELCA “head-shed” on the “Why Jesus?” question. First comes the ELCA press release and (couldn’t resist) some comments bracketed into that text. Then (with no comment) the two “Why Jesus?” pilot-columns and the response that came back from Higgins Road.

ELCA NEWS SERVICE

April 10, 2008

Lutherans Prepare for First Anniversary of Virginia Tech Shooting

CHICAGO (ELCA) – The Lutheran Student Movement at Virginia Tech is providing opportunities for growth while bracing for the media attention of the first anniversary of the worst campus shooting in U.S. history.

On April 16, 2007, a lone gunman killed 32 faculty and students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Va., before killing himself.

The Rev. William H. King said the greatest anxiety he hears

among students as the first anniversary of the shooting approaches is the media attention. According to King, the feeling on campus is "Here come the (news) trucks again."

King serves as one of the campus pastors at Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) located across the street from the Virginia Tech campus.

Mark Meyer, 22, a third-year junior majoring in mechanical engineering, said the campus became a media headquarters overnight. "Individually, we talked to several reporters, but after a few days that became intrusive," said Meyer. He noted that "the media coverage was not exactly matching what I was experiencing."

For many students, fresh media attention means revisiting traumatic memories.

Virginia Tech student Betsy Potter, 22, said that life on campus immediately after the shooting felt like "a fishbowl" with all of the media. "There'd be people crying at memorials and others taking pictures of them," said Potter.

Potter added that Virginia Tech students felt supported by Lutheran Student Movement (LSM) chapters nationwide. "It was amazing how many other LSM (groups) sent notes from all over the country," she said.

When students returned for classes in the fall, they were in very different places, said the Rev. Joanna Stallings, campus pastor, Luther Memorial. Many students were "through with (the shooting) and didn't want to hear another word about it," she said.

"The most important thing we did as a community was worship,"

said Stallings. Students gather weekly on Tuesday evenings for a meal and worship at the student center, and participate in Luther Memorial's Sunday services.

King said, "When push came to shove, it was the worship that provided those words of comfort – the needful, healing things that people were yearning for. There were no answers that were going to explain this."

Meyer said that the campus ministry's programs and spiritual aspects drew him in. "The big reason I kept coming back was that I got to know people and we became friends," he said.

[ES: I wonder if "What a Friend we have in Jesus" was one of those people, one of those friends.]

In addition to attending to spiritual needs of LSM members and the local community, the tragedy provided an unexpected opportunity for public ministry on a national level.

The day after the shooting, King was asked to offer words from the Christian tradition to comfort a diverse community at the Virginia Tech Convocation, which included speeches by Virginia Tech faculty member Nikki Giovanni and U.S. President George W. Bush.

[ES: I don't remember. Did either of them name THE name?]

"I took a lot of heat for not mentioning Jesus in that convocation," said King of the nationally broadcast event. King felt it was important to provide pastoral care for the entire university community at that event, rather than make a confessional statement.

[ES. Yes "naming THE name" is indeed making a confession. It's what Jesus calls for from every disciple. Take a look at Mark 8:38, and draw your own conclusions. How about Romans 1:16, St.

Paul's lead-in to THE cornerstone text (v.17) of the Lutheran Reformation? How can ordained pastors claim an exemption? "Providing pastoral care" and not naming THE care-giver amounts to "providing care" from some OTHER care-giver. How can that possibly be "offering words from the Christian tradition to comfort a diverse community?" Is there any other source for coping with death "in the Christian tradition" than the Easter Jesus? How can you do that without telling folks who that is? And of course, NOT just name-dropping, but telling them why that Easter Jesus is Good News—right now in the midst of all the blood and bodies?]

That evening, King and three other pastors led a joint worship service for members of the Virginia Tech LSM and two ELCA congregations in Blacksburg, Luther Memorial and St. Michael Lutheran Church. "That was the place where we brought the Word into reality, saying, 'This is horrible, but the Psalmist has dealt with this in a lament. This is mysterious, but Scripture does speak to this situation of grief,'" King recounted.

[In "the Christian tradition" THE Word has a personal name. This Word never can be "brought into reality" namelessly. That Word-with-a-personal-name is—so Christians claim—God's own last word for "speaking to situations of grief." He fulfills cry of every Psalmist's lament. Psalmist-laments that don't get connected to Christ are "un-filled-full" laments. They may be good Jewish laments, but they are empty of Christ's victory. "In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell." You are not speaking from "the Christian tradition" when you do not "make a confessional statement" about Christ in the face of death.]

In the months afterward, King said he revisited the theology of the cross, a paradox from Martin Luther's teachings that states that God is revealed and God is also hidden in times of suffering. "Now I'm beginning to get a sense of what it's all

about. In the midst of this, God is faithful, but there are also lots of loose ends that flop around."

[If you still don't "get the sense" why naming THE name is the cornerstone of "the Christian tradition," you have NOT gotten "the sense" of Luther's theology of the cross. Not only the sense, you haven't gotten a clue. WHOSE cross is this cross-theology talking about? Yes, there are "lots of loose ends flopping around." But they are NOT in Luther's theology of the cross.]

"I would never ever say that God did this to Virginia Tech," said King, but, through the experience of pain and suffering at Virginia Tech, the community has been opened to other people's around the world.

[Why did Jesus, however, say that God, not the Roman army, would some day level Jerusalem? And that was a big massacre. Jesus was committed to monotheism. So is "the Christian tradition." There is no space in monotheism for some second (almost equal) deity to be at work—an evil god, a darkness-deity, doing the destructive stuff. Manichaeism—and the Canaanite religions showing up in the OT—manages the horrendous in history by positing a second deity. Not so the Christian tradition. Already in the OT, Canaanite-style di-theism is heresy. "See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand." Deuteronomy 32:39.]

King compared the task to preaching at a funeral: "The gospel matters in that moment or it doesn't matter at all. There's a bracing clarity in that moment."

[Would that there were "bracing clarity" about "Gospel matters" in this press release one year later. Apart from the name of Jesus the gospel does not matter. Nor is it Gospel. Not Good

News at all.]

"I sense that our students do not want their Virginia Tech experience to be dominated by this particular event. People acknowledge the loss. They're not in denial. They just don't want to be defined by that event," said King.

[I won't even touch who is in denial and who is being denied. How about "defining events?" Too bad God doesn't give us the choice to select the events that will define our lives. On second thought, that is not bad at all. Au contraire. For wasn't that the primal temptation in Eden—and ever since—to choose for ourselves what will be the "defining events" of our lives. "Not my will, but thine be done," is Jesus' proposed alternative to the Eden event. Thus crucifixion became the defining event of his life. Christians are those who confess those same seven words of Jesus, and thereby follow in his train.]

"Naming the Pain, Speaking of Hope: Considerations for Religious Address in Time of Crisis" by the Rev. William H. King, published in the May 2007 issue of Journal of Lutheran Ethics is at <http://www.ELCA.org/jle/article.asp?k=721> on the Web.

[Yes, go read it. He names the pain, and gives his reasons for not naming the Name. It is an op ed to this Ed's bracketed words above. With this news release the ELCA is keeping the debate alive. That just might be some more of God's merciful hand in the mix—for the benefit of us ELCA folks. If so, then "Thy will being done." In which case, count it all joy!]

Submissions to THE LUTHERAN. 700 word limit.

VERSION ONE

Why Jesus?

People of many different religions are all around us these days. Jewish folks always were around, but now there are Buddhist and Hindu temples in my home town (St. Louis)—and several mosques. We meet people who worship at these places daily—at the store, at work, all over.

So the question comes up—if not directly from them as we interact, then often in our own hearts: Why Jesus? Why not Muhammed, or the Buddha, or the Hindu Brahman, or Moses, or New Age, or whatever? Why Jesus? It's not just recent immigrants to the USA. My grandchildren raise the same question—and I baptized all five of them!

Is this new? Not really. It's already in the New Testament. Right from the git-go. People then were mostly satisfied with the religions they had. Moses “worked” very well for Jews, thank you. Greeks and Romans didn't need any more gods. So why Jesus?

St. Paul, missionary superstar, heard it often—from both groups. First at the Jewish synagogues where he checked in when he came to town, and then from the “Greeks,” the non-Jewish majority population, when he went downtown. Jews didn't see any need for Jesus. Neither did the Greeks. Why Jesus?

Same question, but two different questioners. So Paul has two different answers.

Jewish Answer

In Acts 13:39 Paul speaks to Jewish questioners. “Everyone who believes in Jesus is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” Did you hear that? Jesus offers something Moses can't deliver, even though Moses was the best God had given us—so far. Jesus is Good News for us Jews. Both Good and really New. Moses could take care of “little” sins, but you were still stuck—“un-free” —from the “biggies,”

starting with the first commandment. Who trusts in God with “all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, all the time?” Nobody. Moses offers no help here.

But Jesus does. So Paul tells them: Jesus, crucified and risen, covers even mega-sins with his offer of forgiveness. Good Friday and Easter Sunday were really mega events! Genuinely “good” for Jewish ears, and marvelously “new.” And it’s a freebee! Good News indeed! For Jews who “got it,” their doxology was “Jesus is the Messiah!” Nothing against Moses, but Jesus is where it’s at.

Greek answer.

Paul’s “Greek” answer to Why Jesus? is different. Remember that famous Mars Hill dialogue (Acts 17). Here Paul responds with “resurrection from the dead.” That’s a switch. Here’s why. Greeks knew nothing about Moses and Sinai and all that, so Paul can’t start there.

But Greeks had a problem. They were flumoxed, sometimes terrified, by death. Humans are so marvelously different from all other creatures that they really should NOT be mortal. Yet everybody dies. No real help from the Greek gods for this. Plato the philosopher offered this solution. He claimed that it was only the body that died, but that the “real me” (call it spirit, mind, psyche) was death-proof. So when a body died, it was no big deal. The “real me” survived. That convinced some. Yet Greeks still wailed at the graveside.

With Greeks Paul starts by deepening the diagnosis. See I Cor. 15. It’s not just bodies that die. It’s God’s own kids, now God’s renegade kids (a.k.a. sinners), biting the dust. The “stinger” in death is this sin-business, and sin gets its killer-clout from God’s law. The axiom is simple: “The wages of sin is death.” The “real me” is renegade too—not death-proof at all. That’s the real terror of death. Total wipeout.

To lick death you have to lick sin and the law. Plato didn't have a clue. Jesus IS that clue. So Paul preaches Christ's resurrection on Mars Hill, God's "crazy" gift so renegade kids can cope with death—and lick it! "It's for you." It's a freebee. Is that "good"? Is that "new"? You betcha. For Greeks who "got it," the response was "Jesus (not Caesar, not Zeus) is Lord!"

That's the way Paul did it. Will it work today? We won't know until we've tried.

VERSION TWO

Why Jesus? Why Jesus at all?

Help From Luther

At the end of his explanation to the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church [*ausser der Christenheit*], whether heathen, Turks [=Muslims], Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Surprise and Paradox

This statement surprises. Luther grants that people "outside the Christian Church" nevertheless do (or, at least, can) "believe in and worship only the one true God." Can he really mean that? Shouldn't Luther instead say that these people are worshipping false gods, not the one true God?

But he doesn't. Even though they are "believing in" the one and only God there is, he says, they do not "know what his attitude is toward them." When you don't know God's attitude toward you—does God like me or not?—you simply can't be "confident" about the God you are "believing in and worshipping." You always have to be on guard—required sacrifices, required behavior, required everything—to make sure (if you really can) to keep this God on your side.

Notice the "fide" in the middle of that word "confident." That's the Latin word for "faith," for trusting the very God you "believe in and worship." If you don't know your God's attitude toward you, how can you possibly trust that deity?

That's where Jesus comes into the picture as Luther reflects on "Why Jesus?" He uses a surprising verb, "having," and connects it to Christ. The no-confidence folks "do not HAVE Christ," he says. That's a depth diagnosis. It's not HAVING wrong ideas about God in their heads. No, it's more about the heart than about the head. They don't HAVE what they need—in the heart—to be "confident" about God. And now Luther pushes the envelope. When you aren't confident about God, he says, you are already in hell—in hell now—long before you die. Check the verb. "They REMAIN in eternal wrath and damnation." Notice he doesn't say they'll go to hell. They are there already. Until Christ enters the picture, until they "have" Christ, that doesn't change. It "remains" from here to eternity.

"Damnation" is not a dirty word in the Bible. Nor is talk about God's "wrath." They are hospital words. Clinical terms. Diagnostic terms. Like cancer. The patient is terminal. And what makes damnation so grim is that God isn't going to do anything about it. He'll not intervene. Paul talks about this as "God gave up on them." That's what wrath and damnation mean in the Bible.

The super exception is Jesus. In Jesus God is trumping wrath and damnation, rescuing no-confidence sinners from their terminal diagnosis.

So how to HAVE this rescue work for you? Having Christ is the answer. And how do you HAVE Christ? Believing equals having. You trust him and his forgiveness promise and you get it. Luther had a folksy phrase for this. Only four German words pasted together into two words: "Glaubstu, hastu." "When you trust (Jesus), you have him." It's that simple. Jesus said so himself—over and over again.

What's the benefit of "having" Jesus? St. John (3:36) gives the answer that Luther quoted often: "Whoever believes the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not will never see that life, but the wrath of God remains upon him."

That's Luther's catechism answer to the "Why Jesus?" question So that the already damned may have Christ as Lord [*Lord means "owner" in both Hebrew and Greek*]. When you HAVE him, you HAVE what he has, the life that lasts. Additional goodies come with that. You get "illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." And they remain.

Is that Good News or what?

[From Higgins Road]

Good afternoon, Ed,

Having read both versions and shared with two colleagues, here's some quick feedback and a question:

First, it's the second version that connects better, as it offers more substance. The first seemed a bit, well, glib rather

than inviting. So, to the question. In the second, in the paragraph (4th from bottom) that begins "So how to HAVE this rescue work for you?"-you say that "believing equals having. You trust him and his forgiveness promise and you get it." That sounds like decision theology. Where is the confession that "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel... ."?

Thanks, again, for your time and your interest.