

Women Pastors – Christ's Gifts to the Church

Colleagues,

For this week, one from the archives of 24 years ago. Ancient as it is, it may cheer some ThTh receivers in the Lutheran Church of Australia right now. In the next days the LCA at its 2000 church assembly will vote yes or no on women clergy. Our year in Adelaide (1994) as guests at the LCA seminary still has us connected downunder even at half-a-planet's distance, so we've been following the yin-yang debate in the church press. This week an LCA woman, dear friend from those days, herself inches away from the ordination credentials required of men, told us of her hopes and enlisted our prayers.

Back in 1976 when Seminex granted the M.Div. degree to our first woman graduate, the congregations supporting us faced the same question. That support group called itself Evangelical Lutherans in Mission [ELIM]. Ex-Missouri Synod Lutherans as we all were, our heritage said women pastors were a no-no. Seminex itself was a loud "no" to a number of Missouri's no-no's, so was Missouri's nix on women pastors another one that had to go? I was asked to speak to the subject at the ELIM assembly that summer. Here's what I said. Peace & Joy!

Ed

"Whose Church Is It? – Receiving Women Pastors"
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By Edward H. Schroeder

"And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for equipping the saints to do their work of ministry." That was last Sunday's Word of God in the second lesson.

The question before the house is whether Jan Smith Jones (not her real name), M.Div., Seminex 1976, belongs on that gift list. Does Christ have her on that list as his pastoral gift to us? And if so, can we see her as such despite our heavy tradition to the contrary?

I hope you have noticed how I've shifted the focus for this hot-potato issue for us ELIMites. Actually it is a double shift. The first shift is from the hypothetical to the particular, the personal, the actual: from "women's" ordination to "Jan's" ordination. The second is a shift in the subject of the question before the house. Instead of "Do we dare to ordain Jan?" The Ephesians text asks us first to ponder "Does Christ dare give Jan to his church as one of his pastors?" The second is a more troublesome question. It seems almost impossible to answer. How do we know what Christ dares to do? But in the end it is the better way to go. For if we can find out whether Christ dares to give Jan to us as his gift-pastor, then the other question is easily answered.

Let's try it. But how to proceed? How to find out what Christ would dare to do? Answer: Read the New Testament. In the gospels we have lesson after lesson of all the risky things Jesus Christ dared to do. The evangelists point out that the riskiest of them all was his daring to forgive sinners. Do we see why that is so risky? Often we do not. We take it for granted. Like Heinrich Heine we say: "C'est son metier." That's his job. Of course he forgives sinners! What else?!

Not so! says the Bible on nearly every page. God's ancient word about his job with sinners is what we memorized in catechism class: "visiting the iniquities of the sinners unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me."

Christ's forgiving sinners is the contrary of God's regular job. Thereby it becomes costly grace. It costs him his life. Since God's own word says, "The soul that sinneth it shall die," anyone who dares to interfere by offering sinners forgiveness is tangling himself in the sinners' web of death. That is for sure. Nothing iffy on that score. He made it clear on Maundy Thursday evening and every Lord's Supper since then: His body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Well, if his death itself was not the risk, what was? What was so daring about his associating with sinners? Is it not this: He dared to trust that God approved of his befriending and forgiving sinners even though this put him under God's death sentence? Talk about daring – daring to trust that God could administer the sinners' death verdict on his Son and vindicate him all on the same weekend!

In a nutshell, Jesus' daring risk is to speak and act as though God too believed his own Gospel and was committed to act according to it. He dared to trust that God did not will to take a detour around his legitimate criticism of us sinners, but, by driving straight through it in his beloved Son, to conquer it.

The most incredible item in the Christian Gospel is the Gospel. The wildest risk of Christian faith is not angels, virgin birth, or walking on water. The wildest risk is that of the publican in the temple: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." THE scandal of the Bible is the forgiveness of sins. To the folks with some

sense of morality it is obscene. To the folks with some sense of real guilt, it is too good to be true. Yet Jesus dares to do it and invites us to dare to trust that God the Father concurs.

But what does all that have to do with the question before the house: Would Christ dare to have Jan on his clergy-gift list? It seems as though those two dares (forgiveness and Jan as pastor) are in different ball parks. Maybe. Yet there are two connections that I see. There may be more.

One is that the daring actions of Jesus do not come to an end with the New Testament gospels. They continue through the rest of the New Testament. Most of that primeval church history is not the chronicle of what the early Christians dared to do, but of what the resurrected Lord dared to do. Very often these early Christians (even with good and pious intentions) were looking in the opposite direction as the Lord did his next daring deed.

The episode of Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius is a classic of the post-ascension daring action of the Lord of the Church. Not hypothetical, but actual, concrete, personal. Cornelius is suddenly there, a non-kosher Gentile. Christ dares to give Cornelius to the Jewish Christians without benefit of circumcision, Torah-commitment, proselyte baptism, or whatever; and suddenly 2,000 years of tradition plus some rather explicit Bible passages go down the drain.

Other daring acts of the ascended Lord are:

- a. Daring to put the chief persecutor (Saul) into harness as a chief promoter of the cause. (Draw your own analogy for what parallel act of daring Christ might yet do among us Elimites!)
- b. Daring to let Peter and Paul slug it out at Antioch, trusting that the Gospel itself (not Peter nor Paul) would win that controversy.

- c. Daring to unleash this foolishness of forgiveness upon the non-Jewish ancient world which couldn't care less about a crucified Messiah or the sales-pitch of forgiveness of sins associated with his name.
- d. Daring to entrust his whole operation to people like Paul the persecutor, Peter the denier, John and James the political wheeler-dealers, to people like you and me. Treasure in earthen vessels, indeed! Clay pots, most often cracked pots!

That is one line of linkage between Christ's daring actions in 30 A.D. and us today. He continues as he has for 2,000 years to do daring things – upsetting, unnerving, discombobulating things that are spin-offs from the big dare of befriending sinners. If I have to be more concrete: we ourselves as confessing movement are an actual episode of Christ's daring foolishness, his magnanimous mercy for us sinners.

A second connection between Christ's daring to forgive sinners and his possibly daring to put Jan on the gift-list of Ephesians 4 exists in the big gift of the forgiveness of sinners itself. Just how big is it? No limits on the beneficiaries, no qualifications on them whatsoever. No limit on the intended clientele – all the world – every creature – all you who labor and are heavy laden.

What about the mechanisms for making it happen beyond New Testament time? Here too the New Testament accent is on the lavish. Read about that in the first three chapters of Ephesians. Luther, too, in the Smalcald Articles says: "The Gospel . . . offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word by which the forgiveness of sin . . . is preached to the whole world; second, through baptism; third, through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the

power of the keys; and finally through the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. (This happens) 'wherever two or three are gathered together in my name' (310:IV)

Christ's body, the church, is the locale where these mechanisms operate. And that leads us to the topic of structure and order in Christ's church. Order includes the ticklish question of Jan's ordination, which question is answered if she is on the Ephesians 4 gift list.

But let us not forget Christ's big risky gift – forgiveness of sinners – as we approach the topic of order and structure. In the Large Catechism Martin Luther writes: "Everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and the sacraments appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live." (417:54f)

Many of us memorized the same confession in the Small Catechism, the third article. See if you can recite that paragraph along with me:

"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith, even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In which Christian church he daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers, and will at the last day raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true."

Here we have the gospel linkage for the question before the house. If Jan is on Christ's gift-list, then her gift must be

congruent with that third sentence we just recited: "In which Christian church Christ daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers." Everything is ordered in the Christian church for that to happen. Could Christ have ordered half the human race out of the candidate roster if "richly and daily" is his will? The only Gospel-grounded case against Jan's being on that list must seek to show that her exercise of the public ministry contradicts Christ's will to have sinners "daily and richly forgiven." Does Jan's public ministry weaken the scandal of Christ's free mercy? Of course it can happen that Jan could exercise her office contrary to the forgiveness of sins. But it could never happen because she is of the wrong gender. It can only happen if she proclaims the wrong gospel. That's the only yardstick for measuring whether anyone is on the pastoral gift list.

And that brings us back to the big question.

Whose church is it? Whose ministry of forgiveness is it? The answers are obvious. It's Christ's. Could the gender of the person administering have any necessary thing to do with the validity of that ministry? The answer is no, by definition.

Melanchthon summarizes the church's ministry in the Apology as follows: "Ministers do not represent their own persons, but the person of Christ. When they offer the Word of Christ or the Sacrament, they do so in Christ's place and stead." (173:28) Note well: The office of ministry re-presents Christ, but it does so not in the PERSON of the minister who looks like or reminds us of Jesus, but in the Word and Sacrament coming from the ministering person's lips and hands. If that Word and Sacrament are what Christ wants served, then the re-presenting that Christ wants is happening. The gender of the representer cannot make that Word and Sacrament more or less Christ-like. For it is not his masculinity, but his mercy which is "the

measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

Would Christ dare to give us Jan as gift-pastor today? There is nothing in his long list of daring surprise gifts that flat-out opposes it. Fact is, his tradition in that respect commends it – surprising, upsetting, routine-wrecking crucifixion and resurrection to get more people on the receiving and the giving end of his daring forgiveness of sins. Could we dare to trust that?

But if Christ has Jan and other women on his roster as pastoral gifts to his church now, why did he wait so long to make the move? I do not know. Could 2,000 years of Christian tradition have been mistaken? That perplexes me too, and challenges my own convictions that that is so. But then why did he wait so long with the Gentiles before he pushed Cornelius as gift in front of Peter? Why was the “fullness of time” so long in coming, such a long wait till the Blessed Virgin Mary? Why was it not the time of Joseph, David, Isaiah, or the Maccabees? I don’t know.

But those are hypothetical questions again, which the Bible regularly avoids. Instead it confronts us with personal, concrete, actual questions. They are finally faith/unfaith questions. Will we trust the big gift from the big Gift-giver and take Jan as part and parcel of Christ’s gift to us his church? If so, fine. Remember Christ’s biggest gifts are people. And the highest trust of him is to receive them as he intends.

If some among us cannot see the connection between the big Gift-giver and Jan on his gift-list, can we trust the gift of forgiveness we do have and refrain from burdening the consciences of those who may call and order Jan to “daily and richly” administer the means of forgiveness to them? Fine. Take counsel from St. Paul: If Christ is proclaimed, we rejoice, even if the way it is done strikes us as non-kosher.

Can we who think we see the clear connection trust that Christ is still caring for his church and for us, even when some of our fellow-confessors don't or can't join us in what is clear as day to us? If so, fine; then we acknowledge that Christ is still the church's Lord.

But what if we are wrong? The risk element is never totally absent. Suppose that on judgment day, or even before, we get the message loud and clear: You were wrong in your conclusions favoring women pastors. What then? Confronted by God's judgment we know there is only one way to go: in the publican's daring words, "God be merciful to me, a sinner – in Jesus' name." The big surprise from the Word of God is: "I tell you, that one went down to his house justified."

If Jan and the other women called to pastoral ministry are indeed Christ's gifts according to Ephesians 4, nothing we do to the contrary can change that. Remember the word of God from our brother Paul, the reluctant feminist: "For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable." When he gives them, we have them.

"And his gifts are that some should be pastors . . . to equip his saints for their work of ministry."