

# Pentecost 2012



*Many moons ago, the Crossings newsletter adopted the form of an acrostic based on “Crossings.” It was a whimsical means of lifting up a variety of topics from the life of our far-flung community, although it gave a significant advantage to people and things that start with s. The present editor, Marcus Felde, being among the flung and not well acquainted with many of our community, finds it difficult to present this as a “news”letter. He would be happy to receive occasional news from you all about how Crossings informs and impinges on your life and ministry. Meanwhile, he shares about the value of Crossings in his own ministry.*

## **C** is for coincidence.

Any two things transpiring at the same time, or at the same spot, or both, could be deemed coincidental. But the term is generally reserved for things you would **never expect** to occur simultaneously. Or in the very same place. Or both. Unexpectability attracts notice. Unbelievability is better. When your response, on hearing a story, is “No way!”

As, for example, when Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Like, really! Or “Blessed are those who mourn.” I wish!

Decades ago, the Manchester Guardian ran a contest to identify the most unbelievable coincidence ever. The reader with the winning entry had been waiting for an important phone call from a friend. Losing patience, he had dashed out to the neighborhood grocery

for a couple items he needed for supper. Hurrying home, he passed a phone booth just as it began to ring. A helpful type, he answered it. It turned out to be his friend calling. The friend had transposed two numbers, and thus—**by amazing coincidence**—his misdialed call was directed to the phone booth his friend was walking past.

Pretty cool.

Honorable mention might have gone to a “Crossings Community” coincidence which occurred when the last newsletter went out.

If you read that issue, you know that I based my ruminations on a certain parody of a Bach chorale prelude. The parody was titled “We All Can Play the Organ.” (I likened the Crossings Community’s Gospel-centered agenda to playing “the *cantus firmus* on a reed,” a nice line in the parody, which I had picked up back in 1962 while at a music camp in Vermont run by the Peabody Conservatory. I confessed I did not know the origin.

Lo! A member of the Crossings Community opened that issue of our newsletter and recognized his very own handiwork. Philip Gehring, organist emeritus at Valparaiso University, together with a fellow organ student at Oberlin Conservatory, had written the parody while on a train trip to an organ convention back in . . . 1950! (Coincidentally, the year of my birth!) What fun it was to meet Philip at the Institute for Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso last month! In a mirthful moment, we sensed ourselves linked by a chain of who knows how many links, by a few silly but recognizable words of hidden worth.

Coincidence. Intersection. Crossing.

But. Could any “coincidence” surpass the one of which Luther spoke when he told how, while studying Romans, he arrived at the “Reformation insight” about our imputed righteousness? He was astounded that the Holy Spirit would inspire him with so precious and illuminating an insight, in “a sewer like this.” (“The sewer”—Latin *cloaca*—being a figure of speech for the world, and he meant the human world, the one John 3:16 is about, which God nevertheless loves.)

How amazing, indeed! How unlikely! How impossible! **Ungebelievagable!** That the serene peace which the Gospel offers us for nothing should be doled out as if it were parade candy to ne’er-do-wells like us who are, collectively, a splotch on this otherwise beautiful planet. That righteousness should be imputed to the unrighteous. That God, like some fired steward, would scratch out “PAID” over our accounts.

The co-incidence of blessing with ruin.

## **R** is for **Ruin**.

Romans 3:16: “. . . ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known.”

I thought I knew Romans, but this surprised me. I did not recognize this line. I guess I was always in a hurry to get to “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (3:22)

Any who speak of salvation need to identify what it is that we are saved **from**. We need to avoid being trapped in our usual vocabulary, which has been interpreted to death. Sin, death, and the devil, say we? Say rather: **Ruin**. It is, after all, biblical language. (“Ruin” comes from a word for fallenness, hence “ruins.”)

The blessing of God addresses our **ruin**. The glad tidings, the Good News, the Promise, needs somewhere to land, to be of use, to make a difference. That place is, according to Romans 3:9-20, smack in the middle of the main problematic of the whole of humanity, whose “throats are open graves,” and all that.

Is that relevant enough? Or is the comfort of the Gospel an antidote to a dyspepsia peculiar to antediluvials, medievals, and antiquarians?

I say, relevant enough. And I find it amusing/enlightening to track the theme of ruin through contemporary expositions of human life, including such

things as cartoons and short stories. Exhibit A: the cartoon on this page. “I want to be so successful it ruins my life.” The idiot in the easy chair gives unwitting evidence to the truth in Jesus’ parable about the rich man who expanded his corn cribs—and then died. Jesus challenges us to calculate how we will buy back our life if we throw it away. We kid ourselves, that “success” is the opposite of ruin, when it may only be a



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different way of being ruined, to believe in success of one sort or another. What is it to be successful, but to be “full” of success?

Ruin, the threat of ruin, impending ruin, the ruin of others, the fear of ruin—these have been the curse of humanity as far back as we can imagine. I’m not talking bad hair day. I’m talking bad hair **life**. Bad hair **existence**. Damnation, if you like.

In **Victory Lap**, a short story by George Saunders, a character declares “My life is over. I’ve killed a guy.” My life is over? Yes, people talk that way. And mean it. He echoes a scriptural trope: “My life is over. I’m blind.” “My life is over. I’ve got leprosy.” “My life is over. My son has died.”

I want to go on and on, but I hope you catch my drift. **What is that which, if we lost it, we would join the “My life is over” chorus?** What would it take to ruin us? What are we counting on, ultimately, so that we can “stand” (Galatians 5:1)

If even success can ruin our life, surely that is evidence of the ineluctability of the problem of ruin. All are vulnerable, all are wounded. All fall down. We are people “of the fall.”

## ***O** is for **OMG***

It should surprise no one if “they are happy who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the scornful.” What would truly astonish us is if we who **have** walked in the counsel of the wicked, lingered in the way of sinners, and sat in the seat of the scornful –if **we** should be filled with perfect joy and peace. Now, that would be interesting (especially in election year USA, when there are not enough chairs in America for all the scornful to sit down).

So when blessing falls on the unjust, we text our friends: “OMG!”

That’s exactly what Jesus makes happen. The derelicts of Romans 3:9-18, those who have no understanding and do not seek God, **THEY** get blessed? No, surely not them! Yes, indeed! For whom do you think Jesus died? Does it not say, “for the ungodly”?

It makes a difference, btw, how you spell OMG.

It starts out “O, my God!” It ends “Oh, my God!”

Since we don’t have a distinct vocative form for nouns in English (the form of address), we sometimes use

“O” to create one. It means that we are trying to get God’s attention.

As when we say “*Kyrie!*” which is the vocative of *kyrios* and needs to be translated “O, Lord.”

This is the cry which the bereft raise to Almighty God, pleading to be remembered—and not for our transgressions but according to his mercy. (Ps 25:7)

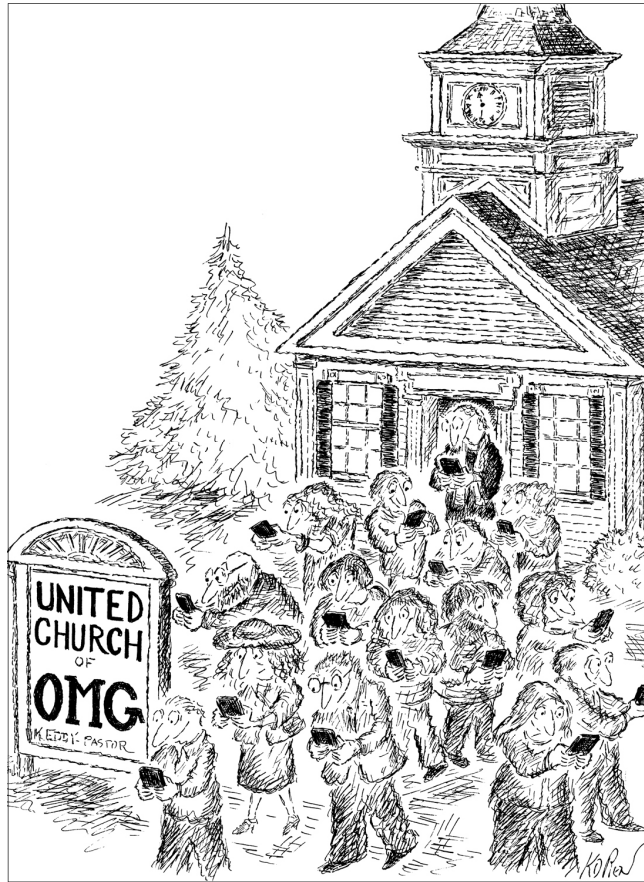
And if we cry to him, will he not give life? Indeed he will. Blessing is in the hand of Jesus, for all who grieve the losses of life. Blessing not for those who thank God that they are not like that other guy, for example, that loser. But blessing for those who, ruined, raise their arms to God as their last and only hope.

Now **that’s a coincidence.** Blessing upon the ruined. Life to the dead. And not only to be rescued from the Ditch of the Day, but from ever having to fear ruin. Because our life is now no longer the gift of anyone or anything else, but the gift of God in Christ.

And being amazed, we use not the vocative but the exclamatory (and testimonial)

“Oh!” As in, “Oh!!!! My God!!!!” This is where blessing brings us. To the place where Thomas once stood transfixed, whose “OMG” was actually MLAMG, right? Seeing the wounds in the side and hands of his (as he supposed) ruined Lord, now resurrected, he had to confess. Twitter, let the whole world know. Our OMG is the Apostle’s Creed, or the hymn of the day, or “Worthy is Christ.” We belong now to the United Church of “OMG, can u blv he died 4 us!!”

Blessing. Right where the ruins used to lie. “Stand, therefore.” (Galatians 5:1)



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## ***SS** is for **SabbatheologieS**.*

What I'm carrying on about here, of course, the "coincidence" of blessing with ruin, is what we try to make clear in each of the Lectionary Text Studies (called Sabbatheologies when you receive them by e-mail) which Crossings delivers to the Community every week. Gratis.

This week, for example, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Cathy Lessmann broke down the Gospel for Sunday. Step three of the analysis, "Final Diagnosis," brings to the surface the thematic of ruin—albeit using different words, the language of the pericope. Let me quote:

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Without a Prayer***

It's not surprising that Jesus talks about "belonging" at least seven times (vv. 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16) because what's at stake here is the issue of "ownership." Simply put: Whatever a person puts trust in becomes one's god (Luther's explanation of the First Article of the Creed). Put differently, one is "owned" by that god. This would not be all that bad if such gods could deliver on their promises to give life, love, and goodness. But they can't and never will. In fact, they end up sucking the life out of those whom they possess, leaving them without a prayer. But we have the inside scoop that God Almighty grieves over this, for he has "lost" (v. 12) those who were originally his.

To be ruined = to be without a prayer. Nice phrase, Cathy.

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Prays for Us***

Even without disciples realizing how desperately in need of outside help they are, help comes their way as Jesus intercedes (prays) for them/us. His words translate into a live-action rescue mission in which he becomes the answer to his own prayer! By what he refers to as his sanctification (v. 19), and we know as his death and resurrection, he clinches a cosmos takeover, the redemption of the lost. As if he is making out his last will and testament, he now entrusts all his hard-earned "belongings" to his Father, saying "they are yours" (vv. 6, 9, 10).

<http://www.crossings.org/theology/2012/theolo906.shtml>

But right there, right upon the heads of people who are without a prayer, God does his rescue, redeems the lost, puts us in the Father's hands.

Blessing. Upon the ruined. The breath of God upon dry bones. Unity upon the fractured world. The Promise and the Gift of God, through Christ our Lord.

## ***I** is for **Innumeracy**.*

Don't take me too literally about coincidence, all right? John Allen Paulos wrote a book called **Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences**. He lets us know how easily we are fooled into amazement when, actually, the numbers favor something happening. Should it amaze you that my violin teacher in Berea used to play cards in the sacristy with Pope John Paul II when the two of them acolyted together as youths? Naah. We're all a lot more related than we have any idea. A lot of coincidences are merely amusing. The world really is small; get over it.

Nor do I think of coincidence the way a friend did who gave me a business card with the slogan "A coincidence is when God works a miracle and chooses to remain anonymous." I'm with Oswald Bayer in this regard, who says "The Word of God does what it says—and it also says what it does!" For studies of coincidence as God's way of getting our attention, or telling us something special, look elsewhere.

I have only used "coincidence" playfully in this newsletter, appealing to you to share my own delight that God would show his favor to me, of all people. All other things—including all other coincidences—are as rubbish, as loss, compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

*Marcus Felde*

## ***NG&S** are for next time. Maybe.*

Meanwhile, surprise us again with your support for the work of Crossings, by using the enclosed envelope to send us a gift. We thank you.

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