

# CROSSINGS

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*In this newsletter, we introduce guest writer Bruce Modahl. Bruce is recently retired from Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, IL. He now lives with his wife Jackie in Fernandina Beach, in northeast Florida. He is a graduate of Christ Seminary- Seminex, and has a ThM from Princeton Seminary and a DMin from Union Seminary, Richmond, Va. For many years we have benefited from Bruce's contributions to Thursday Theology. A true friend of Crossings. Stay tuned....we hope to hear much more from Bruce.*

Sainted teacher Robert Bertram was master of the homely analogy. More than once I heard him say Jesus admonished Mary Magdalene not to hold on to him because the circuit was not yet complete. As the completion of an electrical circuit unleashes the power to light a light bulb so does Jesus' ascension into heaven complete the circuit to unleash the power of the Holy Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify, and keep us in faith.

The hymn "Savior of the Nations, Come" (Lutheran Book of Worship 28) proclaims this circuitry well. Verses 4, 5, and 6 especially

attest to the circuit Jesus runs "for the trophies of our souls." Verse 4 summarizes:

God the Father is his source,  
Back to God he runs his course;  
Down to death and hell descends,  
God's high throne he reascends.



*Bruce Modahl*

An Advent hymn on Pentecost is fitting as God's Advent promises further advance with the Spirit's outpouring. On Pentecost Sunday and the Sundays after Pentecost the Scripture readings testify to Spirit power at work.

The first person claiming to "speak truth to power" spoke a phrase into being that quickly achieved cliché status, especially among preachers. We witness Peter and John speaking the truth to the very council that had sought Jesus' death. In fear that council Peter forcefully denied knowing Jesus. For fear of them, John kept his distance. Now, by the power of the Spirit, they speak truth to that power. By the power of the Spirit, Paul spoke the truth to those in power in the various cities to which he traveled as well as to the leaders of the church back in Jerusalem.

Something about that phrase, other than its being a cliché, strikes me as wrong. I discovered what it is while doing some archeology work in my library. I was looking for Paul Hinlicky's monograph "Christian Faith and the Nuclear Morass," which he wrote for the Church in Society unit of the Lutheran Church in America back in 1984. I have been carting it with me for 30 years from Virginia to Florida to Chicago and back to Florida. I wanted, at some point, to expand on his take on thesis 28 in the Heidelberg Disputation, which reads in part, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it."

For close to 30 years I used Hinlicky's work as the basis for adult catechism. I found what he wrote to be helpful in explaining the role of law and gospel. I clearly remember that he wrote, "The law demands hearts that are obedient to God. However, the law cannot create such hearts. Only the Gospel can create hearts that are obedient to God."

I discovered the monograph wedged in a bookshelf corner. I did not call in the neighbors for a party, but I immediately set to work. First I scanned the underlined parts, but did not find what I was looking for. I read chapter 1; no mention of thesis 28 there. Same result with chapter 2 and chapter 3. All these years and all those miles his monograph traveled with us. I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that Hinlicky wrote on thesis 28. I knew it to be a fact and God's truth that he wrote the words I so clearly remember reading in his monograph. I was wrong, which is the reason for bringing this up. The phrase "speaking truth to power" presumes to know the truth. There is no humility in the statement and more than a touch of arrogance. In my hunt for Hinlicky, I

demonstrated to myself and confess to you my fallibility.

I know Jesus is the truth. The Holy Spirit testifies to me and reminds me of all that Jesus said and did and continues to do for me. Also, I easily find chapter and verse to inform me and keep me informed. And because he is the truth, I think I can deduce some other true things, but first and foremost I know the truth about myself. I am the sort of person who, for 30 years, carts around a book because he is absolutely certain about its contents and is absolutely wrong.



Hinlicky does address a further dimension of what is wrong with the phrase "speaking truth to power." He wrote this monograph before the phrase became a part of our lexicon. However, he spoke prophetically about the phrase when he wrote about *the prophetic word spoken to those in power by those who would be in power*. Speaking the truth to power is a muscular phrase. It claims the same sort of power for the speaker as the power to which s/he speaks.

Jesus' power is qualitatively different from that known in the old dispensation. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world." Many have taken that to mean his kingdom has nothing to do with this world and how we conduct our lives. It has to do only with eternal life in heaven, the locus of Jesus' kingdom. In his next breath Jesus reveals the fallacy in that conclusion. He says, "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over...." In this world those in power use power to force and coerce. Jesus' kingdom is not constituted on the same foundation and it is not of the same ethos as the one Pilate and the rest of us take for granted.

In what we call “the real world” might makes right, you do unto me and I will do back to you only harder, we keep score and get even. The polity of Jesus’ commonwealth has a different platform and ethic, which Jesus set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. In Jesus’ kingdom, power is exercised in a way that is counterintuitive and is the inverse of the way power is exercised in Pilate’s world.

Those who claim to speak truth to power strive to hold the same sort of power as those to whom they speak. Moreover, the phrase posits an *us* (who speak) versus *them* (who are powerful). It *other-izes* those whom we label powerful. I realize, as the cartoon character Calvin observes, “Verb-ing weirds the language.” Yet making a verb out of the word *other* serves to jolt us into paying attention to what we do with the phrase “speaking truth to power.”

We claim a categorical difference between us and the powerful. Such distinctions among us are the result and a cause of enmity. Any enmity existing between us and another group of people has at its root the enmity existing between us and God. The enmity we have toward God is itself rooted in God’s otherness. How often we hear God questioned about human suffering. “What have I done?” “How can God allow this to happen?” are familiar laments. We deal with such lament in our own lives and frequently with those for whom we are pastor.

God stepped onto our side when God in Christ took on our flesh, suffering, and death. God is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, says the author of Hebrews, because God in Christ became human as we are human. In Ephesians,

we hear that God in Christ made peace between us and God and in doing so broke down the dividing wall of hostility between us and others. The newly minted apostles proclaimed the good news on Pentecost in solidarity with those gathered around them. By the power of the Holy Spirit they spoke in the language of each.



Hinlicky says the prophetic word “is the law of God which reveals us in our plight before God” (8). Note the words *us* and *our*. He further says this word “is legitimate only to the extent that it is done in service to the Gospel’s forgiveness of sins, gift of righteousness and promise for the salvation of the world” (12). Later on he writes, “What the church must say is that it is our sin which imperils us and our guilt that drives us perilously on” (23).

We are more than 30 years removed from the possibility of nuclear war, the social issue that occasioned Hinlicky’s monograph. We can learn from this work of applied theology in the light of the history that has transpired since. We easily grow defensive when talking about contemporary social and theological issues. We increasingly live in what are called echo chambers in which we hear only from those who agree with us.

That is the case for me. It is not easy sitting around a table at the Beach Diner after church on Sunday morning. There I listen to people voicing political opinion with which I disagree. I do not like being mocked on the rare occasions I have voiced a contrary opinion. We shared the peace of the Lord an hour before. And 40 minutes earlier we gathered around the altar for the Lord’s Supper. We are in that much solidarity with each other. Is it enough to make a difference in what happens at the Beach Diner’s breakfast table?

*Save the Date.... And Plan to Come!*

January 28-31, 2018  
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7th International Crossings Conference

## **"Up Weak Knees!" The Power of the Gospel for Times Like These**

Perhaps by putting ourselves back into a 30-year-old debate we might learn the skills and receive the spirit's power to speak the good news in current situations. The real issue at the Beach Diner is the same as Hinlicky says it was for "The Christian Faith and the Nuclear Morass." The issue is whether a "Gospel *that good* – with its forgiveness of sins, conferral of righteousness, and hope for the salvation of the world – still calls, gathers and enlightens us all" (5).

Hinlicky says, "We must own the weapons of mass destruction as the sinners who build them, and not as the crusaders who want to 'save the revolution' or 'make the world safe for democracy.' The peril in which we live is for want of responsibility.... It is never to our peril to be the sinners that we are, for truly we are sinners befriended. Our peril is rather to deny our sin" (70-71).

A starting point with my political opponents who are also brothers and sisters in Christ may be to own our political opinions as the sinners we are, confessing that we wield these opinions as weapons against each other. Hinlicky says in the nuclear world we are bound together by vulnerability. That strikes me as a fruitful

affirmation for our breakfast table. We are vulnerable to one another and certainly to God, who has nevertheless befriended us.

The allegiance of the human race is at issue at the Beach Diner as it was in the debate over disarmament. Our common allegiance to God professed in the Creeds puts all other allegiances in perspective. We live, writes Hinlicky, in the "promise of a new and coming sovereignty of God through Jesus Christ....This resource promises the following norm: the works of the Christian are to be works of hope in, with, and for the world of sin, violence, and shame. Two histories, that of Adam and that of Christ, interpenetrate. One works in despair. The other works in hope. For the one knows forgiveness and the other does not."

These are words of hope in, with, and for the world as the norm to which we might hold one another accountable in our conversation around the breakfast table at the Beach Diner. I will let you know how that goes.

*Bruce Modahl*

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