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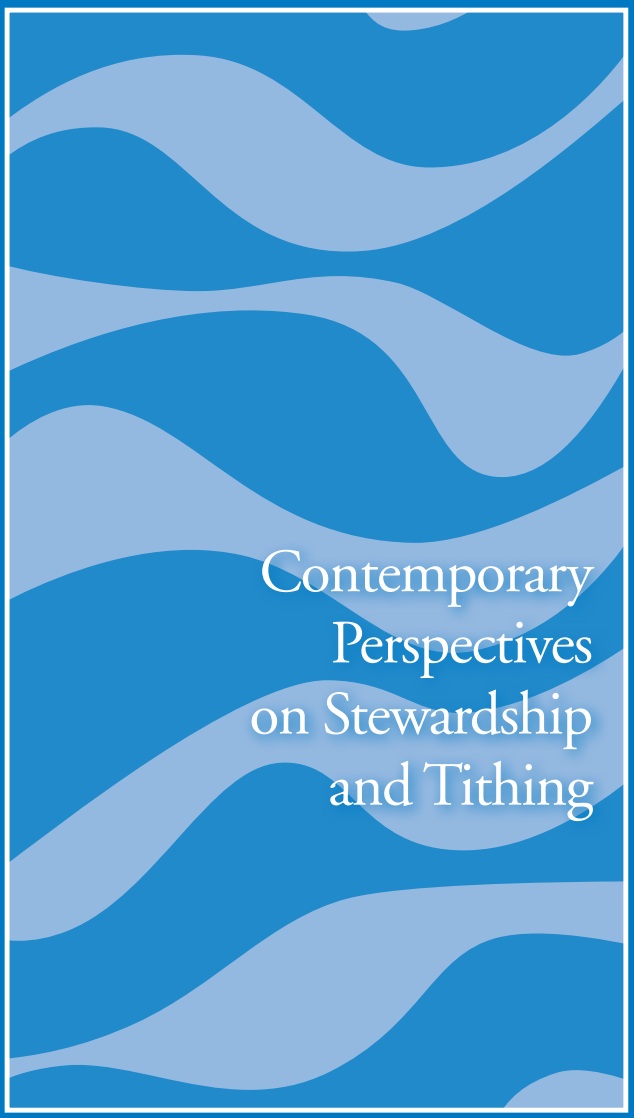

Contemporary Perspectives on Stewardship and Tithing

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Contemporary Perspectives on Stewardship and Tithing

Issue Dedicated to the Memory of Robert J. Furreboe and Connie M. Kleingartner

The October issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* emerges from a fruitful partnership between *Currents in Theology and Mission* and the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation and is dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Robert J. Furreboe and the Rev. Dr. Connie M. Kleingartner.

Almost one hundred years ago, the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation came into being to promote the practice of solid stewardship and tithing. The Foundation was formed by a group of lay people, and its basic funding comes from a trust established by founder Thomas Kane. Initially, the Board of Directors was made up of clergy and laity representing several denominations. In May 2006, the Board donated the Foundation and all of its assets to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, with the understanding that LSTC would continue to advance stewardship/tithing education and practices. The Board hoped that these efforts would involve both Lutheran and ecumenical partners in creating a far-reaching and stimulating conversation about stewardship that would result in transformed lives and communities. This issue strives to further that purpose.

The Rev. Robert J. Furreboe served as the executive director of the Tithing Foundation in May 2006 when its board voted to entrust the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago with its mission and ministry. Bob worked with skill and enthusiasm to ensure an effective transition. An experienced banker who earned a B.A. in history and economics before he attended Luther Seminary, Bob never tired of sharing the biblical and personal testimony which points us all to a spiritual journey incorporating growth in giving as a lifelong practice, moving beyond the tithe in response to the growing realization that the goodness of God endures forever. His many years of service as a pastor and, after retirement, as a part-time resource developer for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois and participant in the Interfaith Airport Chaplaincy Committee as well as other arenas of Christian service, all bear testimony to a fruitful life with roots planted firmly in the promise of God's abiding love and faithfulness.

The Rev. Dr. Connie M. Kleingartner became the first leader of the Foundation when it moved to LSTC, and brought both enthusiasm and imagination to this ministry. Connie, whose academic specialization was leadership theory and practice, had an encompassing view of what stewardship means in the Christian life. She encouraged exploration at many levels, including biblical study, homiletical and liturgical practices, ecological awareness and commitment, and experiential investigation of how money functions in families, congregations, and societies.

Connie plumbed sources of wisdom from the business world and put them in

dialogue with explicitly Christian sources, seeking to identify innovative practices based on values she believed were core to the Christian life. She organized workshops led by stimulating presenters, which drew degree program students, pastors, and church leaders to discuss a range of issues concerning stewardship. She invited students to read texts on stewardship and tithing, identifying those that were of value for pastoral leaders and congregations. She dreamed of producing texts that offered the fruits of all these labors, with the hope that such efforts would continue to inspire fresh new conversations at every place where Christians seek to embody the grace and generosity of the gospel to a grasping, anxious world. Thus she invited presenters to put their presentations in the form of articles and for students to write their reflections as book reviews.

Currents in Theology and Mission is pleased to bring some of the "first fruits" of these efforts to our readers (not all of what was collected could be published in one issue). The first article by **Craig L. Nessan** offers a summary of research on the teaching of stewardship in theological schools which was commissioned by Connie; the article also offers theological reflections on those findings. **Ralph W. Klein** presents the different understandings of tithing that may be found in the Old Testament. **David M. Rhoads** contributes a foundational theological and biblical reflection on the stewardship of all God's creation. **Mark P. Bangert** explores the relationship between stewardship and liturgy. **Craig A. Satterlee** examines the multifaceted challenges and opportunities that confront preachers when they preach on stewardship. Lovers of music and metaphor will enjoy **Mark P. Bangert's** meditation on the relationship between music making and stewardship. **Ginger Anderson-Larson** provides very practical guidance to church members and stewardship leaders on constructing a "money autobiography." **Connie M. Kleingartner's** essay provides an imaginative tool called the "Congregational Money Profile" for church leaders who seek to help their congregations surmount conflicts about how to steward the congregation's money. The book review section begins with seven book reviews on texts that have to do with stewardship and tithing, written by Connie Kleingartner and some of the students with whom she worked.

The *Currents* staff is grateful to the Rev. Paul Landahl, current director of the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation, staff assistant Anna Ballan, coordinator for Continuing Education Laura Wilhelm, and the Tithing and Stewardship Board (LSTC President James Kenneth Echols, Chair), especially Board member Mark Van Scharrel, for the partnership with the Foundation that made this volume possible. Many lives have been and will yet be influenced by the commitments set in motion by both Bob and Connie, as well as the colleagues and students who shared and contributed to those commitments.

Like so many of our forebears in the faith, Bob and Connie labored in ventures for which they could not see the ending. In bringing to fruition a portion of the work they began, we give thanks for their labor and carry it on with gratitude and joy. "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1). So we thank God for these two saints who were faithful stewards of God's mysteries and pray that God will guide us in following in their legacy!

Kathleen D. Billman and **Craig L. Nessan**
October 2009 Issue Co-editors

Best Practices in the Teaching of Stewardship: The Need for Comprehensive and Effective Strategies

Craig L. Nessan

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How do pastors and other church leaders learn what they know about stewardship? What are seminaries teaching students about the meaning and practice of stewardship? Which are the "best practices" in the teaching of stewardship from which others may learn? *The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation* of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago recently engaged in preliminary research with theological field educators to explore the teaching of stewardship at theological schools in North America.[1] While more extensive research is warranted, initial findings suggest surprisingly little focused attention on the teaching of stewardship across the spectrum of theological schools. Based on the number of courses devoted explicitly to the teaching of stewardship and the content of other courses in which stewardship is one topic alongside many others, this research raises questions about how adequately pastors and other church leaders are currently being prepared to give congregational leadership in the area of stewardship.

Current Practices

Douglas John Hall has proposed that stewardship needs to become the lead category for interpreting Christian faith in our time.[2] While theological field educators resonate with this sentiment, very few schools report curriculum objectives or educational practices that are commensurate with this claim. Two patterns in the teaching of stewardship seem to predominate in the schools represented in our sample. First, stewardship is taught as one topic among many others in general courses on leadership. Such courses also may be the only occasion for the teaching of other subjects crucial to the life of congregations (including evangelism, administration, conflict management, pastoral ethics, etc.). How much attention can be given to the theme of stewardship when only a single week

1. All member schools of the Association for Theological Field Education were invited to submit materials in autumn 2008 about the teaching of stewardship at each respective school. Six schools responded with materials, including syllabi. Fifteen field educators participated in a luncheon on January 24, 2009, and contributed data on the objectives for and best practices in the teaching of stewardship. This essay is based on the findings.

2. Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

or even a single class period is devoted explicitly to stewardship in the entirety of a seminarian's education? Second, the teaching of stewardship is expected to occur in the congregations where students are placed for field education. However, not all congregations are equipped to provide excellent field experiences in the area of stewardship. To operate with the assumption that congregational field placements can compensate for the lack of attention to stewardship in the seminary curriculum is dubious. If field education is to promote excellence in stewardship education, then focused attention must be given either to the selection of field education congregations according to the quality of their stewardship education, or those field education congregations must be cultivated as contexts for the teaching of stewardship.

Those schools reporting entire courses in teaching stewardship are relatively few. In our initial survey, only three schools offered courses devoted exclusively to the teaching of stewardship. One of these provided an excellent syllabus on "financial management," however, in this course the theme of "stewardship" was not forefronted. A second school reported offering two distinct courses in stewardship, both of which could be taken together to fulfill the school's "three hour requirement" in stewardship. This school also offers another elective on stewardship and evangelism. A third school provided extensive materials for a series of workshops and a "capstone course" on stewardship for its students in their final year. The workshops covered a variety of themes, including biblical perspectives on stewardship, preaching stewardship, and care for the environment.

Desired Outcomes

Theological field educators were asked to offer perspective on their own understanding of the place of stewardship in the seminary curriculum. What are the desired outcomes for the teaching of stewardship in terms of what graduates should think and be able to do? The most extensive answers related to the thoughts and convictions which should be instilled in students: to understand the biblical texts about stewardship, to believe everything we have is a gift from God, to assist students to develop their own theology of stewardship (time, talents, treasure, environment), to expand the notion of what stewardship involves (including relationships, community involvement, recycling, etc.), to claim stewardship as a call from God, to view stewardship as all inclusive of how we live our lives, to learn generosity toward God and neighbor, to become comfortable with the subject of money, to analyze consumerist culture, to demonstrate care for creation and the weak, to disciple others in stewardship, and to partner with God's mission of saving the world in Jesus Christ. One can see from this list of objectives that there are wide-ranging and serious expectations for what theological schools should be teaching students to think about stewardship.

Theological field educators also had very constructive ideas about what students should be equipped to do as a consequence of their education in stewardship: to engage as stewards in their own lives, to exhibit simplicity, to offer testimony to others about one's own life as a steward, to preach stewardship effectively, to design a sermon series on stewardship, to do exegesis of one's own spending patterns, to transform their use of money, to be unapologetic in the teaching of stewardship, to design effective stewardship campaigns, to become generous givers, and to be skilled in asset mapping. As this list indicates, desirable outcomes involve both dispositional attitudes and

discrete activities. While the activities may be taught in the seminary classroom or in field placements, the dispositional attitudes are more difficult to measure and to instill.

One of the unanticipated outcomes of this research involved how theological field educators believe that the teaching of stewardship should also include the participation of students in a range of spiritual practices to form them as stewards: to meditate on the theme of gratitude, to display generosity of spirit, to pray and to fast (in resistance to consumerism), to practice contemplative prayer on selected Scripture passages *(lectio divina)*, to have no fear about stewardship, to live in gratitude, and to engage in lifelong spiritual discipline. This focus on spiritual formation is consistent with the findings of the recent study on the character of theological education, *Educating Clergy*, which included major emphasis on the importance of formation in the preparation of students for ministry.[3]

If theological field educators are at all representative of the church in its expectations for what should be accomplished in seminary education in relation to stewardship, then there appears to be a serious gap between what we envision should take place educationally and the actual focus on stewardship in the curriculum. As we imagine the desirable outcomes, stewardship education should involve major intellectual learning (about the biblical and theological meaning of stewardship), capacities for leadership in the church (organizational skill, preaching, education, modeling), and spiritual attitudes (gratitude, generosity, prayer, fasting). While there are immense and often unrealistic expectations for what theological schools should accomplish in teaching any number of ministry areas, the actual attention devoted to the teaching of stewardship seems particularly weak in relation to the church's need for pastors who are effective leaders in the area of stewardship. If the church is to be strengthened in its capacity for engaging in the work of stewardship, then seminaries need to imagine new methods and implement additional strategies for preparing those who will give leadership to the church's stewardship efforts.

Best Practices

Field educators offered many creative proposals to enrich the teaching of stewardship in theological schools. Their ideas can be summarized as a list of ten "best practices" for effective teaching of stewardship:

1. *Intentional engagement in stewardship education through field placements.* In order for field placements to become maximally effective in stewardship education, two matters need special attention. First, field placement sites and supervisors must themselves demonstrate effectiveness in stewardship education and procedures. Placing students in sites that demonstrate no particular competence in stewardship, while expecting field education to accomplish the curricular goal of stewardship education is disingenuous. Second, students must be given very specific learning tasks in relation to stewardship in their field congregations. These objectives should be holistic, with explicit attention devoted to cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual competencies.
2. *Learn to analyze data and statistics relating to congregational financial stewardship.* This includes basic

3. Charles R. Foster et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 100ff.

knowledge about budget designs, familiarity with the data and statistical material relating to church finances, and critical skill in reading a budget and financial reports. Field sites can provide raw material for accomplishing this goal, but students will need expert guidance in developing the ability to perform these tasks. The finance officers of the congregation or at the seminary can sometimes serve as resources for teaching these skills. Pastors need not be experts themselves in these areas, but they must be conversant and competent enough in these areas to give theological leadership to the church's financial management.

3. *Development of a money autobiography.* This exercise challenges students to examine the autobiographical influences that have shaped their own thinking and personal behavior related to the use of money.[4] Some schools have prepared excellent resources to assist students in reflecting on how they have come to relate to money and their understanding of financial stewardship. This teaching practice is especially useful in fostering spiritual discipline in relation to money and its use. Schools employing the money autobiography as a teaching practice need to be prepared to devote significant time to analysis through the use of this tool.

4. *Incorporate stewardship education into student financial aid programs.* One of the shocking developments in theological education involves the extent to which students are incurring high indebtedness through the years of their education.[5] Some of this is the consequence of the actual increasing costs of theological education, but can be exacerbated by poor fiscal management on the part of the student. Financial aid offices are well situated to provide students with instruction on sound money management practices that are consistent with the church's understanding of stewardship. This can be accompanied by financial counseling for those students who request additional and personalized advice.

5. *Include involvement in community service as part of the seminary curriculum.* Stewardship is not only about my personal life or life in the Christian church. Stewardship entails care for the whole society and creation itself. One strategy for broadening our vision is to incorporate community service in local agencies as part of the seminary curriculum. Through this practice, students share their gifts by involvement in social service which enhances the fabric of the larger community. When such efforts are interpreted as dimensions of stewardship, the horizon is broadened and the meaning of stewardship extends beyond the confines of the church to care for the world in very particular forms and settings.

6. *Develop seminary practices that encourage stewardship.* Within the life of the theological school, there are a variety of practices that can enhance students' comprehension of the scope of stewardship. Alternative gift markets, fair-trade shopping,

4. Ginger Anderson-Larson, "A Money Autobiography," in *Currents in Theology and Mission 36* (Oct 2009): 362-366.

5. Anthony Ruger, Sharon L. Miller, and Kim Maphis Early, *The Gathering Storm: The Educational Debt of Theological Students.* Auburn Theological Seminary. Auburn Studies, No. 12: September 2005.

energy saving methods, communal gardening, health-conscious cafeteria menus, and proactive recycling each are examples of stewardship-in-action that contributes substantially both to the practice of stewardship now and to learning how to give leadership in the future. When these practices are accompanied by ongoing education about their benefits and are articulated as dimensions of the life of the stewarding community, the entire seminary community grows in its understanding of the all-encompassing nature of stewardship.

7. *Implement stewardship testimony into seminary worship services.* The proclamation of the word of God takes many forms. Within worship many traditions concentrate on the reading of Scripture and the sermon as the primary forms for communicating God's message. However, in some traditions the practice of testimony also has a privileged place. Every tradition can be enhanced by learning the value of testimony at worship for learning to speak the faith to others. In relation to stewardship, the implementation of temple talks and personal testimony about one's life as a steward can be powerful influences on the life of the community. There is a reason why capital campaigns almost always include personal testimony as a strategy for fund-raising. Testimony persuades others to re-imagine their own lives and make commitments they had not envisioned.

8. *Teachers model stewardship in their teaching and service to the school.* What do you remember most about your own education? Particular courses that were taught? The content of syllabi? Great lectures? Innovative teaching methods? While each of these contribute positively to the educational process, it is likely that the greatest influence of all was the personhood of the one who was your teacher. The modeling of those who teach has an inordinate impact on the learning of those who attend educational institutions, including theological schools. When professors model lives of exemplary stewardship, grounded in care for their own health and care for the well-being of others (including the most vulnerable and creation itself), students take notice. Demonstrating stewardship through the witness of one's life speaks loudly!

9. *Explicit attention to stewardship in the seminary classroom and reading assignments.* This is the most conventional of the ten best practices. But it remains a vital approach to the teaching of stewardship in a theological school. Dedicated time must be spent in the classroom, employing a variety of pedagogies, for the teaching and learning of stewardship. This includes lectures, discussion, small group exercises, films, and other creative activities devoted to exploring the theme of stewardship. Reading assignments on the theme of stewardship must be well chosen and carefully processed in coursework. All course assignments need to be well designed to encourage students to accomplish the desired outcomes of stewardship education.

10. *Encourage spiritual practices that instill stewardship as a way of life.* As these ten best practices illustrate, learning stewardship is not a matter confined to the classroom or lecture hall. Rather, learning stewardship entails a holistic approach to the entire life of the theological school. Insofar as the spiritual formation of those who serve as religious leaders is crucial to

the well-being of the institutions they will lead, seminaries do well to introduce students to spiritual practices that promote gratitude and generosity as core values of the Christian faith. Nurturing one's own spiritual life is foundational for the practice of ministry, both for the sake of one's own health and for the quality of service one has to offer others. Prayer, devotions, spiritual direction, and Sabbath-keeping each help instill in the student an identity as steward constitutionally, not ephemerally.

This list of ten best practices for the teaching of stewardship is in no way exhaustive. Rather, it is indicative of a comprehensive approach to stewardship that can become deeply ingrained in the life of a theological school.

This raises another key point implicit in the data from the field educators. While the number of course offerings dedicated to the teaching and learning of stewardship needs to increase across the spectrum of theological schools, it may be even more important that these schools themselves (begin to?) operate out of the perspective of stewardship. When the personnel, policies, and practices of theological education become oriented to the fundamental conviction that all that we have is a gift from God, received in gratitude and shared generously, then stewardship is not just another subject taught within the curriculum but the very paradigm which informs who we are institutionally. If theological schools do not operate with this perspective, no amount of classroom teaching or field education as the "explicit" curriculum may be able to compensate for what has been instilled through the "implicit" curriculum of institutional practice.[6] The ten best practices for the teaching of stewardship encourage both institutional commitment and a theological curriculum that foster serious engagement in student learning of stewardship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to stress the preliminary nature of this research. Much more extensive data gathering and analysis would be necessary to verify these suggestive findings. One final factor deserves mention, however. Those schools that currently demonstrate significant attention to stewardship as a theme in their curriculum seem to be related disproportionately to outside resources, institutes, or foundations that hold them accountable for their involvement in the teaching of stewardship. In some instances this manifests itself through the use of outside resource people to engage students in teaching stewardship. In other instances, it involves the particular relationship of an organization dedicated to the cause of stewardship to an individual school.[7] The value of these organizations is in their ability to lift up the importance of stewardship in the theological curriculum, provide resources for the teaching and learning of stewardship in the life of the church, and especially to hold theological schools accountable for their stewarding of the treasures God has entrusted to their care—financial resources, the resources of creation, and human resources found in the students, faculty, staff, and graduates.

6. Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs (*3rd ed., Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001).

7. For example, the Stewardship of Life Institute in relation to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg or The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation in relation to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Stewardship in the Old Testament

Ralph W. Klein

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Stewardship in the Bible is about generosity and hospitality—God's generosity and hospitality first, and therefore also ours. When Sarah and Abraham showed generosity and hospitality to three strangers, who dropped by their house one day, it resulted not only in the reassurance that Sarah would have a child within a year, but it established them as models of what stewardship means (Gen 18:1-15). The author of Hebrews admonishes us readers: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).

The Ceremony of the First Fruits

Deuteronomy 26 talks about a simple ceremony at harvest time when a farmer took the first fruits of the grain harvest, put them in a basket, and brought them to the temple. There he confessed to the priest that God's promise of the land, first made to Sarah and Abraham, had come true, whereupon the priest placed the basket by the altar.

The farmer then testified how his ancestor Jacob had been a wandering Aramean, who lived as an alien in Egypt

This picture of the gift of Manna is taken from the Koberger Bible of 1483, which is part of the LSTC Rare Books Collection.

where he became a great and populous nation. When the ancestors had been oppressed and treated harshly in Egypt, they prayed and the LORD delivered them from slavery to freedom, with many signs and wonders. Then the LORD brought Israel to the promised land and gave them access to all its produce. That generous gift of land and produce led to the farmer's generosity toward God and to his forthright confession.

Self-reliance is a kind of idolatry—one fears, loves, and trusts in one's own ability, one's own efforts. God's gracious generosity creates our faith and trust in God, and such faith, as Luther stated, needs to be active in love. The lessons Israel learned in its long wilderness wandering had to do with the ultimate basis for life: "[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3).

Such astonishing faith and generosity were discovered by Elijah in the nameless, Canaanite widow of Zarephath. She was down to her last cup of meal and last tablespoon of oil, that she planned to use for a last cake for herself and her son before they died of hunger, when Elijah asked her for a handout. She listened to and trusted in God's promise delivered through Elijah so that he, and she, and her whole household were able to eat for many days (1 Kgs 17:10-15).

Luther once said that fasting and bodily preparation are indeed wholesome preparations for receiving the Lord's Supper, but those individuals are truly worthy and well-prepared, who have faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Our liturgy is often defined as "the work of the people," but it can also blind us to the needs that lie all around us. What "work of the people" is most appropriate for us? The book of Isaiah recognizes that there is good fasting and there is bad fasting, there is fasting that concentrates on oneself and there is fasting that concentrates on the needs of others. With God's rebuke also comes God's promise in Isaiah 58: "[6]Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? [7]Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? [8]Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard." The fasting God wants is concern for others; God also promises those who fast in this way that he will continue to march before and behind them, as in the Exodus from Egypt.

We are often appalled at those who promise prosperity and riches as the benefits of Christian faith. Such theology of glory overlooks the seriousness of our sin and underestimates the value of grace. But the Old Testament is replete with proverbs that indicate that those who worry that generosity will bankrupt them are only rationalizing their stinginess. Consider this proverb: "Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want" (Prov 11:24). Or again: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full" (Prov 19:17).

Tithing

Talking about stewardship in Old Testament times brings up the concept of tithing, or setting aside a tenth of one's

income for religious or charitable purposes. Just remember, however, that Israel was an agricultural society that did not use coins or money until the Persians minted coins in the late sixth century. So a tithe was a tenth part of the grain or olive harvest, a tenth part of the grape crop, and a tenth part of the animals one raised.

Israelites actually had three kinds of tithes. With the first kind of tithe one took the tithe to the temple in Jerusalem where the whole family ate the tithe in the temple precincts. In some respects this tithe resembles our thanksgiving or harvest festivals. In harvesting crops or raising animals one recognized that there had occurred an act of receiving and not just of producing. Hence one celebrated that harvest in the temple, in God's presence, with one's whole family (Deut 14:22-23).

A second kind of tithe took place every three years when one stored the tithe in one's hometown. The Levites, who had not been allotted land with the other tribes in the book of Joshua, could draw on these food reserves. So could the widows, the orphans, and the resident aliens, the Old Testament's common references to the marginalized and the poor. This kind of tithe has many things in common with our food pantries. Perhaps it was even better since the Levites, the poor, and the marginalized could "eat their fill"! The result of such generosity in setting aside one's tithe for the benefit of the needy would be that the LORD would bless all the work undertaken by those who contributed to this local food storehouse (Deut 14:28-29).

Such generosity and hospitality for the needy are expected in the harvesting process itself. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of the harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God" (Lev 19:9-10). Generosity and hospitality toward the needy require more than the occasional donation or the gift of a Christmas basket. They also should lead us to address the causes of poverty and seek to change these situations through community-wide actions. Our political priorities are a central part of our stewardship.

The third type of Old Testament tithe comes closest to the use of our contributions to support the church and its ministries. According to Numbers 18:20-32, all tithes were to go to the Levites, the second-rank clergy who carried out their ministries in connection with the tabernacle and later the temple. This tithe is called an offering to the LORD and compensates the Levites for not having any agriculturally based income. But the Levites became tithers too since they were to give one tenth of their income to the priests or higher-ranked clergy.[1] One might conclude that Levites outnumbered priests by about ten to one. Anyone who violated this obligation was subject to the death penalty. Passing on a tithe received to others resembles the ELCA custom of congregations contributing to synodical and churchwide budgets.

The prophet Malachi reports an interesting dialogue about tithing. The LORD had promised the people that he would return to them if they returned or repented. "How shall we return?" the people ask. And God responds, "Would anyone dare to rob God, and yet you have robbed me?" "How so?" the people respond. The divine answer: "By not giving the full tithe to the temple." Give me a try, the LORD says, "and see if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour down

1. According to 2 Chr 31:2-12 and Neh 10:32-39 and 12:44-45 the people brought their tithes to both the priests and Levites, apparently a later development.

for you an overflowing blessing" that will lead to abundance in grain and the fruit of the vine (Mal 3:6-11).

We can draw several conclusions about tithing in the Old Testament. First, it was an opportunity for rejoicing in God's generosity and expressing thanksgiving for it. Secondly, it was a means of providing adequate food for the poor and the marginalized. In a sense, poverty was outlawed in the Old Testament: "There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy" (Deut 15:4). But if and when there is someone in need, the Bible urges Israel not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward the needy neighbor (Deut 15:7). Generosity and hospitality are self-understood obligations of the people of God. Thirdly, in some passages dealing with tithing, the tithe is used explicitly and exclusively for the support of various kinds of clergy personnel. How the apparent conflict between this third tithe and the first and second uses of the tithe was resolved is not clear to us. All three understandings are surely salutary. In any case, tithes were by no means the only offerings Israelites were expected to make since there were also burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin and guilt offerings, and wave offerings.

The concept of one tenth of one's income for the church and charity is certainly a worthy goal. In some cases, it may be more than a person can reasonably afford. In other cases, it may be too little. Remember the widow Jesus watched giving in the New Testament. What she gave was a trifle, but it was all she had!

Stewardship of Time and Talent

Stewardship does involve our money and our willingness to contribute it to church and to agents of social change, but stewardship also involves everything we are and everything we do. The church cannot survive without financial support, but it cannot thrive without love and care and even committee meetings. There's a wonderful story in the book of Exodus about Moses' need for the time and talents of others. Israel was being attacked by the Amalekites, and whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses, senior citizen that he was, could not keep his hands up in the air all the time. That's where Aaron and Hur came in. They sat Moses on a rock and then held up his hands on either side. The clear victory was Israel's (Exod 17:8-13). Israel would have lost this battle without two busy people taking the time to support Moses and using their hands to make his blessing of the troops continuous.

Where would Jeremiah have been without his faithful servant Baruch to record his words (Jer 36:4)? He might still be in the king's cistern had not Ebed-melech the Ethiopian fished him out (Jer 38:7-13). How could Jeremiah have sent his famous letters to the exiles without messengers and lectors like Elasah (Jer 29:3) and Seraiah (Jer 51:59)? His famous temple sermon might have been his last utterance had not the elders of the land cited the precedent of the prophet Micah, who had said equally harsh things about Jerusalem and the temple, that led Hezekiah to pray so that the LORD changed his mind about destroying Jerusalem (Jer 26:17-19).

Stewardship of Creation

One of the greatest challenges in the twenty-first century is how to care for our endangered planet. Global warming threatens catastrophic changes in climate and in rising ocean levels. Oil, iron, coal, and other natural resources are finite. They

must be used wisely, with full consideration of those who come after us. Many plant and animal species are threatened with extinction or with loss of habitat. All of these threats to our planet are directly affected by human behavior.

Discussions of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis identify human responsibility in the care of creation. In Genesis 1:26, God says: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." This is commonly referred to as the image of God. That is, women and men are assigned a rulership role or even a royal role in the world. We are to rule God's world in God's name and for God's stead. Dominion, however, can be either domination or beneficent rule. And that's where the drawing shown above, created in ancient Mesopotamia, comes in. It shows an ancient king or perhaps even a god exercising royal rulership. That means defending against external enemies like this attacking lion, but also exerting kind and healing protection over an endangered deer. In this image of royal rule there is no place for exploitation or violence.

The second chapter of Genesis has a complementary picture of the human vocation. Here the LORD God takes the man and puts him in the garden of Eden "to till it and to keep it" (v. 15). Instead of "till," other English versions have "dress it" (KJV), "tend it" (NLT), or "cultivate it." But the Hebrew Bible actually has a verb that is translated literally as "serve it." In this understanding, humans are not so much over creation as under it. Ours is a servant role, making sure that the earth, its environment, its natural resources, its plants and animals survive, thrive, and grow.

I find these two images of our stewardship of the earth complementary to each other. We are to exercise God's generous rule over the created order, and we are at the same time in a servant's role to help brother/sister earth, our master, live up to its full potential.

Conclusion

We can learn much about stewardship from the people of the Old Testament while recognizing that our challenges—and our resources!—are different and even greater than theirs. When Israel told the history of its story with God in Psalm 136, beginning with creation and continuing with the rescue from Egypt, the gift of the land, and God's memory of them in their low estate, they repeated twenty-six times, God did all this, "for [God's] steadfast love endures forever." Steadfast love, mercy, grace, loyalty—however you translate the underlying Hebrew word—that is the attribute of God that we imitate, and that is the attribute of God that makes our generosity and hospitality possible.

Stewardship of Creation

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Steward is a biblical term that refers to a manager who is responsible for the goods and property of another. A steward is not therefore an owner, but one who has a responsibility to an owner to treat property with care and respect. *Stewardship* is a term that refers to the responsibility of a steward to manage wisely. The unjust steward was one who took advantage of his position to aggrandize himself (Luke 16:1-13).

Stewardship has come to be used in the Christian community in a broader sense for our responsibility to manage wisely the goods and property that are in our possession. The assumption is that we do not really possess or own anything. Rather, the world, including us, belongs to God, and it is arrogant for humans to think otherwise. Therefore, we are not owners but stewards of all that comes into our arena of responsibility—income, assets, property, goods, time, talents, and our very selves. Religious stewardship is management as sacred trust.

In recent times, the concept of *steward* has been applied in its most original and fundamental meaning to refer to our human responsibility to care for the Earth itself (Gen 1-2). Our human failure to be responsible stewards of Earth has led to the current ecological crises threatening global climate stability, the ozone layer, and the diversity of plant and animal species. Ecological problems also include the pollution of air, the despoiling of land, the degradation of fresh water, and threats to the health of the oceans. The loss of forest and arable land in alarming proportions has tremendous implications for food security. Human population, now approaching seven billion, is placing stress on every ecosystem on Earth. As Christians, what is our responsibility?

Stewardship of Creation Is Our Human Vocation

The Bible is a good place to find guidance. The concept of *environmental stewardship* originates with the first of the creation stories, in which God gives humans dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land (Gen 1:1–2:4). Traditionally, Christians have distorted the mandate to "exercise dominion" to mean that creation was made for human beings and that we have a right to dominate and exploit creation for our own wants and needs. This has led to incalculable abuses of nature.

What we now know is that the Hebrew word for *dominion* does not mean "to dominate" or "to exploit." Rather, it means "to take responsibility for," as a ruler would be responsible to assure the well-being of those in the realm. In this first creation story, human beings were created last, not as the so-called "crown of creation," but in order to exercise responsibility for the well-being of the garden Earth. According to Genesis 1, exercising responsibility as part of God's creation is the main reason

humans were created. Therefore, being stewards of creation is foundational to what it means to be human. Caring for creation is not an add-on, not a sideline, not related just to part of our calling. It represents our proper human relationship to Earth. This portrayal puts human beings squarely in a caretaker position in regard to environmental stewardship.

We Are Called "to Serve and to Preserve"

The second creation story goes even further in clarifying the concept of environmental stewardship (Gen 2:5-15). In this story, God put Adam and Eve in the garden in order "to till and to keep" the land. However, the words translated as "till" and "keep" may be misleading. The Hebrew word for "till" is a word used to depict the service that a slave gives to a master. And the Hebrew word for "keep" means to preserve for future generations. Hence, the mandate "to serve and to preserve" the land places human beings not in a hierarchical position over creation but in a position of service to it.

Just as the later Christian message depicts Jesus as a servant-king, so humans are challenged in this creation story to assume a similar role: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Care for creation is to be exercised not to serve our own wants and desires but to serve the best interests and well-being of all Earth-community together, including ourselves.

All Creation for Its Own Sake

This stewardship role for humans as servants of creation is reinforced by the idea that creation was made for its own sake. After God created each part of creation, God saw that it was "good" in its own right—even before humans were created. Furthermore, in the first creation story, God mandated not just for humans but also for the animals to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." God wishes for all species, not simply human beings, to survive and to thrive. In Psalm 104, the psalmist celebrates creation and explains that the grasses were made for the cattle and the crags for the mountain goats; all of creation has been arranged by God so that all animals receive "their food in due season." If we are to be good stewards of Earth, there is a foundational reverence we need to bear toward all of life for its own sake, because it is God's creation and it is filled with God's glory.

The biblical writers invite us to delight in creation, for delight is the right basis for our use of it. We will preserve that in which we delight! And we are called to love creation. We will care for that which we love! Even more, we are invited to love creation as God loves it: not in the abstract, but concretely in terms of caring for life. The biblical Sabbath regulations require that humans give rest to the animals every seven days; and in the seventh year they must allow the land to lie fallow, free slaves, and remit debts (Exod 23:10-11;

Lev 25). As good stewards, we are called to take these kinds of actions in order to serve and to preserve Earth-community.

Stewards of God

Hence, all our actions of stewardship are to be done as part of our service to the larger will and purposes of God. In some sense, we humans are partners with God in being responsible *for* creation. As humans, however, and not gods, it might be more appropriate to say that we are responsible *to* creation. Most fundamentally, however, we are responsible *to God* to care for creation. This is our vocation under God.

So often we make our plans and ask God to bless them. Instead, we are called to discern the plans of *God* and then to ponder how we can bring our lives into conformity with them. According to the Scripture, God wills for creation to thrive in all its diversity. God wills for air, sea, and land to bring health and well-being to all creatures. God wills care for the vulnerable. God wants there to be peace and justice in the land, for humans and non-humans alike. We need to see anew the purpose of our lives within the context of God's larger purposes for the world and to exercise our stewardship in the context of this more embracing vision.

The all-embracing vision of God for creation is violated when there is injustice by humans against humans. The biblical authors know the close relationship between the ways people exploit Earth and the ways people exploit the poor. In the Bible, when people are oppressed, the rest of creation suffers too—the land languishes and the grains fail (Jer 2:7; Isa 24:4-7; Joel 2:2-20). We are called to steward resources not only in ways that generate sustainability for Earth's resources but also in ways that sustain life for the poor and vulnerable. In biblical terms, we are to act out of God's compassion for "orphans and widows." We are called to care for the least and the lost—human and non-human alike—just as Jesus "came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Yet there are pitfalls here, and we need to face them if our vocation as stewards is not to end in the arrogant and paternalistic role of the privileged few exercising control over the world and "the poor" to serve their own interests. If the task of stewardship is to serve as a sacred trust on behalf of all Earth-community, we must be willing to go beyond our own wants and desires in order to see creation through the compassionate eyes of the God who empowers the weak and makes common cause with the most vulnerable. It is only as servants of Earth community that we avoid paternalism.

> "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." *Mark 9:35*

Our Oneness with the Rest of Creation

Fundamental to such a wise and humble exercise of stewardship is the experience of oneness with the Earth-community we serve. God's covenant with Noah and all creation affirms that all living creatures are in solidarity with each other in covenant with God (Gen 9:8-17; Hos 2:18). This experience of creation's oneness is affirmed by the admonitions throughout Scripture

for all creation to worship God: "Let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy" (1 Chr 16:29-34). All parts of creation together—human and non-human creatures and the rest of the created world—are to "praise the name of the Lord" (Ps 148).

We are called to see our responsibility for this parcel of creation as part of our vocation as God's stewards.

There is a wonderful scene in the book of Revelation that portrays this common praise. John the seer says: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, "blessing and honor and glory and might to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be forever and ever" (5:13). What a vision! We are in solidarity with all creation; and if we do not care for Earth-community, the whole creation will not be able to celebrate together in praise of our creator.

Moreover, we are also called to be at one with future generations to establish and maintain a sustainable life on Earth—to leave creation healthier and more resourceful than it was in the previous generation. There are some Christians who claim that we do not need to worry about the future of Earth because Jesus is about to come to deliver the saved *from* Earth. Others claim Jesus will come and rescue Earth from any problems we may cause for creation. Others see personal salvation as so important that heaven is all that matters; Earth is but a brief pilgrimage for individual souls. There may be some truth in some of these beliefs, but in no way do they begin to tell the whole biblical truth.

The Bible says unequivocally that God's purpose is to restore all creation. The whole notion of incarnation—God becoming flesh (John 1:1)—is that the divine movement is not an escape from Earth but a movement toward embodiment in creation. Jesus became flesh to bring "new creation" (Gal 6:15). Paul testifies to this vocation when he claims that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains" ready to "be set free from its bondage to decay," as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-25) who will care for each other and for Earth. We are called now to be those children of God who exercise stewardship in relation to all creation.

There is an affirmation of creation in the biblical writings that cannot be denied. The vision of the end-time in the book of Revelation is that God will come to a renewed heaven and Earth and will dwell here among people (21:1-27). The vision of the New Jerusalem is a vision in which nature is in the midst of the city. In this vision, the river of life flows right down the middle of the city streets; it is clear as crystal and it is available to all, free of charge, so that none may be deprived of fresh water. And the tree of life is thriving on either side of the river; and it yields fruit twelve months of the year, so that no person will be hungry. God will dwell here with them and will wipe away every tear from their eyes. As we lean toward the salvation of God, this is the vision that we as stewards

are called to live out in our lives and to foster in others.

Implications for Our Life and Times

In our modern culture, we have been ruthless and unjust stewards of Earth. We too often place profits above people; we put security for ourselves above security for all; and we act as if the world is there for our use alone. Much of our contemporary global economy is based upon the most efficient ways to strip resources from the land and to pay the lowest wages without regard to the health and well-being of workers. We have reduced land and people to commodities that serve financial markets. We have pursued a standard of living without regard to its impact on nature and people. Furthermore, ecological disasters have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable people—third world countries, the poor, people of color, the sick, and the elderly. These also happen to be the ones with the least resources to respond. Together we have a responsibility to discern our immoral and destructive ways, confess them as sins, and turn to a new way of living.

Our Stewardship of Creation Today

So what does this mean for us in the twenty-first century? Clearly, it means that we need to embrace stewardship of Earth-community at a collective and a personal level. We need to change the system and we need to change our personal behavior.

The Collective Trust. First, we need urgently to act collectively as stewards in our responsibilities to creation at the local, state, regional, national, and global levels. We need to support laws and policies and systems that promote the health of the environment—promoting cooperation with global treaties, strengthening legislation that secures clean air, safe water, and productive land; advocating for policies that reduce energy consumption and assure species diversity; placing limits on land use and on waste; and investing in environmental technologies. In addition, we need to reverse the process of economic globalization toward the use of local products and services. We need to find ways to encourage the greening of business and industry. We need to redirect the whole economy toward technologies, industries, and services that foster a sustainable lifestyle for the Earth-community. Commitment to *ecological justice* demands that we attend especially to the poor and vulnerable, the ones most affected by ecological degradation. This collective transformation of society is crucial, for if Earth-friendly treaties, laws, policies, and common practices are not in place, the changes we make in our personal lifestyle will be much less effective than they might be otherwise.

Also, as congregations committed to stewardship of creation, we can collectively renew our beliefs and actions to bring about a reformation in the church as an institution—transforming our worship and directing our educational programs toward creation-care, making our buildings and grounds Earth-friendly, observing best environmental practices at coffee hour and meals, and teaching our children to be Earth-keepers. We can incorporate environmental stewardship into the full identity and mission of our parishes, such that care for creation becomes part of the ethos of our life together. Thereby our congregations can become flagship communities that serve as witnesses in the towns, cities, and regions in which we are located.

The Personal Trust. Second, we need to become responsible stewards in our

personal behavior, particularly in relation to that which is directly in our care. Each of us has a small piece of creation for which we are directly responsible, namely our living space—an apartment or house and perhaps some land. We are called to see our responsibility for this parcel of creation as part of our vocation as God's stewards. Consider this: your living space is connected to virtually every environmental problem we face—the emissions from your furnace, the food in your refrigerator, the coal from the electricity you use, the water that goes in and out of your house, the products you purchase that are shipped from a distance, the treatments you give your lawn, the gas in your automobile, among other things. The choices we make about these everyday matters have a direct impact on the well-being of Earth and Earth-community. We *can* make a difference, every single day. We have it in our hands to make daily choices that can lighten our negative impact on Earth and help to restore God's creation. What is more, these same practices can be extended to our places of work. We are stewards of our own local environment as a sacred trust.

There is a concept of *environmental tithing* that is relevant to our vocation as stewards of creation. Most people are familiar with the biblical concept of tithing, the giving of a "tenth." The biblical tithe has been used as a marker of responsible stewardship. This tenth is given back to God—to the church, to the poor, to other causes deemed expressions of God's will—as a symbol that the whole belongs to God. We can also apply the tithe to the stewardship of our personal resources of Earth. Can we reduce our electrical use by ten percent? Can we reduce the gas for heating by ten percent? Can we reduce the water we use by ten percent? Can we eat ten percent less food that comes from a distance? Can we eat fewer meals with meat? Can we travel ten percent less than usual? Can we invest a tenth of our financial resources in funds that contribute to sustainability? Can we set other goals to reduce our impact on the environment by a tenth—or more? And if we can, could we then contribute the money saved toward further efforts at restoring Earth? Tithing is just a beginning as we contemplate all we can do on a daily basis at home, at work, and in society to foster and maintain a sustainable world.

Our Spiritual Discipline

Making these choices as God's Earth-keepers may involve sacrifice on our part as we seek to live a simpler lifestyle and walk lightly on Earth. In our Christian life, the key to making our world sustainable is viewing our change of behavior and our sacrifices as acts of love and kindness toward all creation—toward other people; toward other creatures; and toward the well-being of land, sea, and air. In doing these things as part of our spiritual discipline, we exercise our vocation as stewards of creation not out of fear, guilt, shame, outrage, or despair. Rather, what makes this journey sacred is that we act with a gratitude nourished by the fountain of God's grace, an inexhaustible source of "living water" that will sustain us for a lifetime of loving creation, and that will enable us to be stewards of creation with hope and joy!

Liturgy and Stewardship

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Eucharistic Economy

Attention to terminology gets us going in the right direction. While it's common currently to reach for the word "worship" to describe what Christians do when they assemble on Sundays, the word suffers from being one-sided in favor of humans as the originators of the event, and from its ambiguity over against the communal nature of Christian assembly. "Liturgy" fares better because liturgy in its root sense means work done for the good of the people. Although having said that, it remains unclear who is primarily doing what in this gathering to work. While it may not be practical for English users to borrow, the German word *Gottesdienst* (literally God's service) can mean either God's service to us or our service to God, and thus conveys the double movement that lies at the core of what worship means.

The point of this delay here at the beginning is to develop a sense of the dynamic if not messy interaction that results from assembling as the body of Christ. In that respect the assembly behaves just like its Head, for Jesus came as acting Word, mixing things up in the world in order that the world might receive the love of the one Jesus called "Father." One experiences that most intensely in Eucharist, so a discussion of stewardship and liturgy easily anchors itself in the meal. Not that one couldn't find relationships elsewhere in the church's assembly; there are ample and fruitful resources in the lectionary to situate stewardship in the liturgy of the Word, just as it might be possible in a completely different vein to probe the role of the assisting minister as bearer of patterns for living out the faith in the world.

Focusing on the meal begins to clear the way, but there is yet another small delay as we take up the word "stewardship." Its more recent history in the 1950s and 1960s, when Protestants of all sorts sought to anchor financing in organized programming, provided us with events like Stewardship Sundays and pyramid pledging. Sometimes the programs appeared purely and unabashedly practical, and in other instances they grew out of theological considerations. Jesus, it was noted, proclaimed the upside-down nature of the reign of God by citing the rich man and his dishonest steward in Luke 16.[1] The Greek word for steward, *oikonomos*, signals the relationship between stewardship and economy, suggesting that affairs of the household constitute an economy to which God is quite committed. In turn that leads us to reconsider the topic at hand as meal economy, or still more useful, Eucharistic economy. We learn the economy of the Christian assembly in the Holy Eucharist.

In Luke/Acts, the author leads us

1. See helpful summaries of the history of stewardship in William O. Avery, *A History of Stewardship* (Chicago: Lutheran Laity Movement for Stewardship [ELCA], 2000), 7-9.

with astonishing speed from encounters with the resurrected Jesus to his presence in church as the body of Christ. With the Ascension out of the way, chapter two of Acts narrates the building up of the church through the Spirit-driven conversion process, good for all people:

> . . . Unless bread and wine drop magically from the sky, someone needs to provide bread and wine for the meal and someone needs to set the table.

Peter preaches (vv. 14-36), people repent (vv. 37-38), they are baptized (v. 41), and then incorporated into the assembly's meal, prayers, fellowship, and teaching (v. 42). This pattern looks remarkably like the baptismal procedures of the next century, though as described above lacks one further ingredient. That shows up in Acts 2:44, just two verses after the summary of assembly activities into which the recently converted are received. In verses 44-45 we read "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute them to all as any had need."

In other times and in other places this bit of information came to be ignored or dismissed as a radical, impromptu, if not impractical, experiment in communal living, surely not to be considered a persisting paradigm. In fact, as model to be imitated it does lack usefulness. But as derivative example of the new reign of God, as a practical measure of the resurrected life, and as an ideal mode for living in and with the rest of creation, this style of communal life begs attention. As a pattern for Christian communal living, having all things in common neither went away quickly nor did it recede into the background. A few chapters after the Pentecost account the reader meets Ananias and his wife, both of whom died suddenly because they withheld resources from the community in order to keep something for themselves. The message from the book of Acts to the young church is clear: hoarding causes death.

Ritually this life of having all things in common may have found expression in the *agape* feast, possibly remembered in the *Didache*.[2] These gatherings consisted of weekly meals, it has been conjectured, to which converts brought those things to be shared at table as well as other goods to be given to the poor and needy. In line with their distaste for pagan sacrifices and with their desire to focus on spiritual sacrifices these Christians likely did not give special liturgical attention to the gifts, even though the items were physically present during the thanksgiving said over bread and wine. By the end of the second century, for a

2. Otherwise known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," a second-century document that has origins in the sub apostolic period. See "A Church Manual," *Early Christian Fathers*, vol. I of *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 161-182, especially p. 175. See also Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, trans. Francis A. Brunner (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1955), 2:1f.

variety of reasons, the thanksgiving over bread and wine occurred apart from such love meals and gradually displaced the *agape* gathering entirely. But such separation also severed a communal economy from the Eucharistic celebrations.

As the ritual thanksgiving by itself gained popularity the offerings that were always brought to the gathering now began to find recognition while the assembly was at worship. In the West, bread, grapes, flowers, birds, oil, incense, ears of wheat and whatever could be of use for the poor came to be placed on tables around the main table. Then after some time the presider took a more active role at the appropriate juncture in the liturgy to speak a prayer over these gifts. In the East, the faithful brought such gifts to a side room from which then during the liturgy a priest would bring some bread and wine for the thanksgiving, an action now known as the Great Entrance. Written reports of the assemblies from this period show increased attention to the gifts as a way, presumably, to counter encroaching Gnosticism and its disdain for material things.

This short and circumscribed overview suggests a truth potentially made much clearer by a more detailed history. *The truth is that at least for the first millennium Christians offered their gifts in the context of the thanksgiving meal*. They enacted such gift giving in a variety of ways and with a variety of understandings but one way or another they detected ritual and theological connections between the meal and their responses to the needs of others.

The same cannot be said today. Such connections are blurred by intervening quirks of history, such as the decline of every Sunday Eucharistic assemblies or the giving habits shaped by those state-supported church economies that the immigrant churches brought to the shores of the United States.

While the travel may be challenging, there is a roadmap for journeying along the way of Eucharistic economy in contemporary congregations. In other words, stewardship and liturgy are one and the same thing. Augustine advised, "If you receive well, you are what you have received."[3] To grasp the connections we turn to three moments in the rite for Holy Communion: Bringing the Gifts Forward, the Sacrifice of Thanksgiving, and the Ministration of the Meal.

Bringing the Gifts Forward

Rubrical language in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* shows some squeamishness on this point, as we will note below. For the time being it is sufficient to observe that unless bread and wine drop magically from the sky, someone needs to provide bread and wine for the meal and someone needs to set the table. Sometimes an individual buys flour and takes the time to bake; another purchases the wine while the table setter goes about her tasks well aware that she gets to do something special for the assembly. These are things often done for no pay in order that the meal might occur. These gestures are grateful offerings. Even in circumstances in which the altar guild or office manager may have purchased the bread and wine, these gestures have far-reaching implications.

In and by themselves bread and wine consist of products that encase the staples of life—wheat and the fruit of the earth. Moreover, both entail work of one kind or another, not to mention the skills of the baker and the vintner. In today's society work of that nature is not bartered usually, but it is rewarded with salary, thereby intro-

3. As quoted by John H. McKenna, "Eucharist and Memorial," in *Worship* 79/6 (November/December 2005), 508.

ducing money to the setting of the table. In any case people regularly prepare for the meal by offering stuff and service, primed thereby to be reminded that the preparation and the meal are of the same cloth. All of that comes to life with the words from the neighboring prayer, "blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions,"[4] and, embedded in the memories of some of us, the words went on: "With them we offer ourselves."[5]

But there is more to be observed about bringing gifts forward. Wheat and grapes are gifts of the creation. While we as co-creators can fashion bread and wine and even alter the DNA of the grape, these gifts are not ours, they are not owned by us. They are gifts from God. That places many of our cherished economic assumptions into question, for since we don't really own anything, neither can we give it away. With others we are the recipients of life-giving material, returning it to the source from which it came. Eucharistic economy is about spending and sharing and not about accumulation. We have all things in common.

But there is still more. Setting the table with bread and wine has a purpose unrelated to gaping with others at food. Mouth-watering visual presentation is not the point of the meal. Instead this food is to be shared, and in its sharing we will encounter the body of Christ. Through eating and drinking eucharistized bread and wine the very bread and wine is transformed. It will assure us that God has taken on flesh and blood and resides in the ordinary. In this way we set forth not only bread and wine but also our selves, work, time, money—our lives in their entirety in order that by extension lives too might be transformed, again and again, as members of the body of Christ. In this way the meal reinforces what we have forgotten, ignored, or denied.

Some would say that because we don't own a thing it's not possible to offer it or even to suggest such a disposition by bringing stuff forward. Congregations have chosen various ways to set the table, some simply placing what's necessary on the table before the assembly gathers. Others pay additional attention to the way the food gets there. In any event, to eliminate signs of active gratitude may also encourage inhibiting indifference, if not ingratitude. To give a heart a way to express its inclinations and desires, it may, to paraphrase Luther, be "more precious"[6] to call attention to Eucharistic economy within the assembly's liturgy. That would seem to happen best were all the gifts brought forward in solidarity with everyone present.

Money gifts, as well as talents, time and possessions ritually connected to bread

4. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, commended for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 107. Hereafter cited as *ELW*.

5. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Minister's Desk Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 206. Hereafter cited as *LBW*. This service book preceded the *ELW* as the approved volume for use by the churches that formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

6. Luther actually wrote, "What sacrifices, then, are we to offer? Ourselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer… And although such a sacrifice occurs apart from the mass, and should so occur—for it does not necessarily and essentially belong to the mass, …yet it is more precious, more appropriate, more mighty, and also more acceptable when it takes place with the multitude and in the assembly." "A treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass," (1520) in *Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*, American edition (ed. Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 98.

and wine challenge us to rethink "stuff," to reconsider our habits of accumulation, to embrace creation as sustaining gift, and to *spend* for the lives of humans, animals, and plants. Only then can we sing rightly those happy words, "Heaven and earth are full of your glory."

Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

In the *LBW* gifts gathered during the Offering are "presented"[7] while in the *ELW* they "may be brought forward."[8] This is a small but not insignificant change of wording that represents the tip of a larger iceberg, the name of which is "sacrifice." In the past decade scholars from many denominations have taken a new interest in that red-letter word.[9] Many of them agree that the word "sacrifice," its equivalent "offer," or any suggestion of such intent clouds God's unprompted, gracious gift contained in the Lord's Supper. Two concerns lead to this cautious position: 1) the perceived need to reclaim promise as the center of the Lord's Supper as opposed to succumbing to the recurring temptation of supplanting promise with human effort; 2) a growing sense of disparity between God's loving justice and God's seeming abusive nature in sending the Son as a sin offering. These concerns are interrelated. To address them it is proposed that believers think of Jesus as martyr rather than sacrifice, that there be a renewed emphasis on God's activity in the Lord's Supper, and that language about sacrifice be muffled when possible.

Framers of the *ELW* had another reason for taming the language. During the final stages of preparing the *LBW* some reviewers and critics found some aspects of the proposed materials objectionable. For instance, the attention paid to the Offering in the proposed rite for Holy Communion with its procession and special prayer (all new to North American Lutherans) prompted a flurry of discord and subsequent ill will, all described and documented in Ralph Quere's history of the development of the *LBW*.[10] With the *ELW* came a chance then to make revisions that could be viewed by the disgruntled and their disciples as an irenic gesture.

Hesitancy about the word "sacrifice," together with a sincere desire to include various Lutheran concerns, led to subtle changes in material moved from the *LBW* to *ELW*. Great Thanksgiving IV from *LBW*[11], a translation of a prayer attributed to Hippolytus that originates as early as the third century, contains these words after the Institution narrative: "Remembering, then, his death and resurrection, we *lift* (emphasis mine) this bread and cup." A more faithful translation of the original would be: "Calling to memory, therefore, his death and resurrection, we *offer* to you the bread and chalice…"[12] In the *ELW* the text has been revised to read: "Remembering, then, his death and resurrection, we *take* this bread and cup…."[13] The apparently troublesome

7. *LBW*, 66.

8. *ELW*, 106.

9. See for example Gordon Lathrop and Lorraine S. Brugh, *The Sunday Assembly*, vol. 1 of *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 194-200, and David N. Power, "The Anamnesis: Remembering, We Offer," *New Eucharistic Prayers* (ed. Frank C. Senn; New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 146-168.

10. Ralph Quere, *In the Context of Unity* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2003), 38-46.

11. *LBW*, *Ministers Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 226.

12. *The Mass*, in vol. 1 of ALBA Patristic Library (ed. Andre Hamman; Staten Island New York: Alba House, 1967), 36.

13. *ELW*, 70.

concept behind the word "offer" therefore undergoes repeated Lutheran surgery by transplanting "offer" with "lift" and finally with "take," all presumably to remove notions of sacrifice or offering from Eucharistic practice.

One might argue, however, that the very idea of covenant, as in the "cup of the new covenant," implies a certain response on the part of the one entering such a covenant. So it was, at least, with the old covenant (Deut 5:24, 6:4-9), and so it was for the lawyer who asked Jesus about the great commandment (Matt 22:34-40). While the particular Lutheran accent on God's undeserved grace in the Lord's Supper remains a comfort and source of strength for every believer it doesn't seem to lose prominence if linked to the desire on the part of receivers to give themselves over to the Giver, even if outwardly expressed.

A way for grasping this interaction appears in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. In his section on the Mass Melanchthon explains that there are two basic kinds of sacrifice: one is the atoning sacrifice by which we describe the death and resurrection of Jesus; the other is the Eucharistic sacrifice.

It does not merit the forgiveness of sins or reconciliation but is rendered by those who have already been reconciled as a way for us to give thanks or express gratitude for having received forgiveness of sins and other benefits.[14]

Several paragraphs later Melanchthon explains what he means by this sacrifice of praise. He helps the worshiper to understand that while praise and thanksgiving are the immediate and noticeable manifestations of the table participant, such praise is backed up by prayer, faith, confession, the afflictions of the saints, and "all the good works of the saints."[15] Among such good works is surely the rendering over of stuff, of money and time for the welfare of the assembly, not "as satisfactions for those who offer them," as Melanchthon goes on to say, but as signs intricately connected to the sharing of bread and wine.

Was Melanchthon alone with his view of sacrifice in the context of the Lord's Supper? Hardly. In his "Treatise on the New Testament," an early (1520) work showing progress toward a more mature theology of the Lord's Supper, Luther wrote that "we lay all of our sacrifices on Christ; from this we learn that we do not offer Christ, but that Christ offers us."[16] With that Luther states he is willing to call the mass a sacrifice.

In other words, as the faithful receive the bread and wine and eat and drink together they should sense themselves being tugged, being pulled along by Christ, incorporated into the very offering he himself is for the world. This is stewardship at the core, *this* is Eucharistic economy. It's difficult to experience such an economy when most of the Great Thanksgivings of *ELW* are devoid of expressions of self-offering. Fortunately, some traces of the old confessional understanding still remain. For instance, with the background just provided, the words of prayer I in the *ELW* just might sound differently at this moment: "We give thanks to you, O Lord God Almighty, not as we ought but

14. "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," *The Book of Concord*, in Article XXIV: *The Mass* (ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 261. While dealing with the complicated history of the theme of sacrifice within the Lord's Supper it is to be noted that from the beginning thanksgiving is central to its understanding.

15. Ibid., 262.

16. Luther, "Treatise," 99.

as we are able; and we ask you mercifully to accept our praise and thanksgiving."[17]

Ministration of the Meal

Talk of sacrifice may yet be too unfriendly for Lutheran souls. We want to say that if self-offering is to happen at all, if we are to recognize Eucharistic economy in our Sunday assemblies, then we want to assert that the agency of our self-giving needs to come from outside of ourselves. So it is that we speak of sanctification as the outcome of the Spirit's indwelling. So it is that we invoke the Spirit into our midst when churchly things are about to happen, so it is that we can even speak of cooperating with the Holy Spirit in our own personal histories of faith.

It should come as no surprise that the Great Thanksgivings we employ contain unapologetic invocations of the Spirit, especially of the kind that have us as the object. From prayer I of the *ELW*: "and with your Word and Holy Spirit to bless us, your servants,…so that we…may be formed to live as your holy people."[18] From prayer III: "Holy God, we long for your Spirit,…May your Word take flesh in us."[19] And from prayer IV: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us…Raise us up as the body of Christ for the world."[20]

Succinct and crisp, these compact invocations betray their importance within the dynamics of the moment. The Spirit's role in this breaking of bread is made most clear in the invocation from prayer VI, formerly prayer I in the *LBW*: "Send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, that we who share in Christ's body and blood may live to the praise of your glory."[21] Share is the operative word. The Eucharistized bread and wine are for sharing, for eating and drinking, for the formation once again of the body of Christ. Contrary to so much Lutheran catechesis, this invocation teaches that the Lord's Supper is not about a thing or things but rather about an *action* that table partners do together. As they eat and drink their eyes are opened to see the Christ and to see themselves as church—the body of Christ for the world. The first Christians understood that to mean the pooling of resources; like later believers, we may find that slightly impractical, but the impulse to give all away for the sake of the world burns deeply here and should not be diminished. In that way, to refer back to Luther, Christ sacrifices us.

Living as we do in our current national economy it is tempting for us to approach the table with the idea of accumulating *my* portioned allotment of forgiveness. In the Eucharistic economy my allotment is by-product of *koinonia*, that practice of sharing given and learned in the bread and cup.

If ritual is rehearsal, as Mark Searle maintains,[22] then the way bread and wine is shared among those in the assembly is possibly the most crucial moment of Christians at worship, for the process of ministration will shape and inspire the inclinations of those involved in the Eucharistic economy. Here are some questions one could ask about matters

17. *ELW*, 109. Gordon Lathrop writes: "if worship and the moral life are invited by the talk of 'offering' into self-giving, if such self-giving acts are seen as reflecting and celebrating the all-sufficient self-gift of Christ rather than in any sense adding to it, the language can be and has been used to speak the Christian gospel." *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 141.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 110.

20. Ibid., 111.

21. Ibid., 66.

22. Mark Searle, ed., "Serving the Lord with Justice," *Liturgy and Social Justice* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1980), 32.

related to the distribution of bread and wine: Is it clear to communicants that the reception of just a little bread is meant to insure the eating by all? Is it real bread? Is it clear that ministration by lay people models the sharing we all do with one another, rather than a dispensation by only the ordained giving away holy gifts? Does dipping encourage thoughts of withholding trust or commitment? From where does the bread and wine come? Do multiple kinds of bread and drink give too much preference to individual preference thereby bypassing the sharing inherent to the sacrament? These and similar questions live in parallel universes, one being the ministration itself, the other being the dimensions of the Eucharistic economy.

We pray with imperfect understandings and with stumbling words. For this reason the last words of prayer before ministration are the words Jesus taught us. It is beneficial to attend to them, as we pray "Give us this day our daily bread." Daily bread, like manna, comes portioned for one day only. Stockpiling ends in waste and in neglecting the needs of others. By implication what we do have is to be shared so that others do not go hungry, so that the body of Christ might be just that in a neighborhood. Further, the prayer is plural; "give us," it says, and so we are directed to pray as if our lips were the lips of the very needy and poor. How can we pray on their behalf if we do not see ourselves as the answer?

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Eucharistic Economy in the Assembly

A Google search using the two words "Liturgy" and "Stewardship" yields nearly a million and a half sites. Most are chance combinations for newsletters and Sunday worship folders, but there is a notable number of sites that offer materials to busy church leaders. The use of specially prepared service orders or prayers are not the godsend they pretend or seem, since they tacitly subscribe to the notion that stewardship is something that one brings into the assembly on occasion. Arguments above make the case for an understanding of stewardship as a new economy, an economy constantly enacted in Holy Communion by the resurrected One. Such an economy is not only revealed there but it provides the power by which it is sustained. The best way to translate these factors into practice is to enter the dynamics of Lord's Supper and then to imagine ways through which your congregation can enter with you. Some initial suggestions follow:

In spite of intuitive objection, give thought to deleting offerings from services that are non-Eucharistic, such as Morning and Evening Prayer, Service of the Word, etc. At the same time strive to include an offering in every service of Holy Communion, occasionally complementing it with a ritual presentation that is clearly understood by the members of the assembly. The presentation could (should) sometimes (other than Thanksgiving Day!) include gifts apart from money, bread and

wine. Such a procession might involve all the people and its music should provide sonic focus on the act.

Prayers connected to the offering in *ELW* generally recall the poor and hungry only. In most congregations this slant is needed. However, through use of all the prayers suggested and through teaching and preaching assist the worshipers to grasp that every gift for use by the congregation is included in this gesture of presentation. The cadences of these prayers will after a while be embedded in the hearts of those who gather, shaping their very impulses to give. Therefore, it makes sense to use them regularly.

Use the Great Thanksgivings. Teach and preach their theology. Employ their phases for your own meditation periods so that the words and phrases come easily as you speak the gospel. The same can be said for the Lord's Prayer.

With as many people from the congregation as possible scrutinize the ministration practices in your assembly to determine what kinds of habits and understandings these practices convey.

At a more advanced stage, the congregation may want to entertain two offerings within the assembly Eucharist. One would be for the poor and hungry, and one would be for the needs of the organization, its workers, and its facilities. This might serve to differentiate the core responsibility toward the poor and needy from self-directed responsibilities like paying the air conditioning bill. On the other hand, if a cool building is understood to be a means to more effectively shaping the people into the body of Christ for the world, then the poor and air conditioning can beneficially be linked.

Finally, but not least in importance, Eucharistic economy by its very nature is for Christians the engine for ecologically aware living. Earth Day deserves a celebration of Holy Communion. But there are other opportunities to let the earth be a player in the new economy. In the lectionary system certain pericopes lend themselves to an unexpected surprising linkage of a given festival, Holy Communion, and care for the earth. Psalm 96 is such a text, appearing on Christmas Eve every year, as part of the texts for Proper 4 in series C and for Proper 24 in series A. The psalm invites Eucharistic economy in a scope that is cosmic, providing a dazzling incarnational context for earth care: "Say among the nations…The one who made the world…will judge the peoples with *equity* (emphasis mine). Let the earth be glad, let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy." The psalmist notes how the appearance of Jesus solicits the joy of sea, field, and tree. How will all of that happen unless we cease to inhibit the creation from its vocation? In this way the psalm is a call for us to enlist ourselves in the Eucharistic economy with glad and generous hearts.

Stewardship and Preaching

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What do we mean by *preaching stewardship?* Today, stewardship is such a churchy term that many who listen to sermons may not know what preachers are talking about when they use the word. In fact, even preachers and congregational leaders have different ideas of what it means to preach *stewardship*.

For some preachers and leaders, and certainly for some churchgoers, preaching stewardship is an annual event, usually held in October or November. In this once-a-year sermon, the preacher makes the case that the members of the congregation increase their giving to the church, in response to programs and priorities proposed by the church board or congregational council, or a financial shortfall or crisis. The preacher might highlight a special project, such as a new roof. The preacher might point to the congregation's mission, to all the good things the church is doing, as if to say, "This is a good investment." The preacher might appeal to people's sense of gratitude, inviting them to "give back" for all the benefits they receive. Or, the preacher might spell out the dire consequences that will befall the congregation unless more money is found. These fund-raising approaches are used successfully by the symphony, an alma mater, the cancer society, and many worthy causes and worthwhile institutions. They make people's use of money a response to a given need, the congregation's performance, or people's attitudes and feelings, suggesting that preaching stewardship is only appropriate at certain times or under specific circumstances.

For other preachers and church leaders, the notion of *stewardship* has expanded from the money we put in the offering plate to embrace everything from how we speak of Jesus and our faith, allocate our time, take care of our bodies, manage our finances, and care for creation. This understanding of stewardship often makes preaching easier and more comfortable for the one in the pulpit. The preacher can dance around how people use their money, time, and skills by talking about stewardship as an all-encompassing umbrella and never getting specific. Yet this approach to preaching stewardship frequently fails to connect with those sitting in the pews, because it is not what the preacher really means to say. As one congregant told his pastor, "If you mean money, say money."

Even if preachers clearly define stewardship as money, time, or skills, so that parishioners know what they mean, ought sermons to be about these subjects? Rather than money and giving, skills and volunteering, time management, health and wholeness, and even the state of the planet, preaching is concerned with God, particularly as God reveals God's very self to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Stewardship is different from fund-raising because stewardship is a response to God. Preaching, therefore,

needs to provide a word from God, or an experience of God, or a testimony to God's saving activity, to which people can respond. In this way giving, like faith, is inspired and not demanded.

I am not saying that all the topics that stewardship covers—tithing, volunteering, leading a balanced life, caring for creation, and whatever one would add to the list—do not belong in the pulpit. Clearly, if we follow Jesus' example, every issue is fair game for preaching; no topic is out of bounds. To say otherwise is to identify areas of life where Jesus has no place. Yet I recall with regret stewardship sermons, that I both preached and heard, so intent on getting the congregation to increase their giving that Jesus was somewhere in the background. Jesus needs to be front and center. However we define stewardship, whatever we say about money, skills, and time, it ought to be grounded in and flow from a clear and bold proclamation of the gospel. Rather than making any of these topics the subject of the sermon, we do better to preach the gospel and then move to the possibilities and implications of the gospel for the issue or topic that we seek to address.

So what do I mean by *stewardship?* In this article, I confine my discussion of stewardship to how we use money in response to the gospel, and explore some of the possibilities and implications for preaching about money and giving that flow from proclaiming the gospel. I suspect that the observations I offer are applicable to other stewardship topics that preachers and congregations may wish to address.

Let Jesus Do the Talking!

When preaching about money is grounded in the gospel, Jesus speaks the first word. Preachers do well to let Jesus do the talking. According to Scripture, Jesus has much to say about money, most of which preachers could not get away with saying themselves. "For where your treasure is," Jesus says, "there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21). Even more pointedly, Jesus declares, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt 6:24). According to Luke, Jesus is on the side of the poor. In his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, for example, Jesus declared that the Lord anointed him to bring good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). Jesus called the poor "blessed" because the kingdom of God belongs to them (Luke 6:20). The rich, it seems, share in the kingdom of God by virtue of how they treat the poor and needy. As Jesus tells it, while a poor man named Lazarus sat with Abraham in the life to come, a rich man's treatment of Lazarus in this life landed him a chasm away (Luke 16:19-31). Clearly, Jesus has opinions about what we do with our money.

When preachers allow Jesus to do the talking, they listen to Jesus before they ever say a word. By listening to Jesus speak to them before and as they speak to the congregation, preachers stand (often uncomfortably) with their people under God's Word, rather than standing with God's Word against their people. Jesus can then address both the preacher and the hearers, who together try to understand and faithfully respond to what Jesus is saying.

Preachers that follow the lectionary, the system of Scripture readings appointed for worship on a given day or occasion, rather than selecting their own sermon texts, report that Jesus determines when they preach about money, as well as what gets said. Rather than allowing the calendar of the annual stewardship campaign or the congregation's financial situation to determine when money gets addressed from the pulpit, these pastors preach about money whenever money is part of

any of the appointed Scripture readings. They are freed from having to fit money and giving into a sermon when these topics are needed, in essence preaching the Bible from the perspective of money. They can point to the readings, which they did not select, and honestly say that, on this occasion, to preach biblically is to preach about money.

Perhaps most important, congregants observe that sometimes the best stewardship preaching occurs when the pastor is not asking members to increase their giving. Perhaps congregations best may consider the more foundational question of how money, wealth, and material possessions relate to faith and discipleship when hearers are not feeling pressured or called to make an immediate response. People have time to reflect, pray, and allow Jesus' words to sink in and stick with them.

Jesus' Assumptions about Money vs. Ours

Preaching and listening to sermons about money is uncomfortable, in large part, because of many of our norms and assumptions about money. For example, many Christians assume that money and giving are private matters between themselves and God. Even in some families, people do not discuss what they earn and how they spend their money. Christians may be reluctant to talk about what they give because they do not want to be perceived as either boasting or shaming others. When people's personal assumptions about money, such as that money is a private matter, go unquestioned, they often become normative in the congregation.

When money and giving are addressed in sermons and openly discussed in the congregation in ways that challenge people's assumptions, people become uncomfortable. Rather than resolving their discomfort by allowing Scripture to inform their assumptions, they may attempt to enlist Scripture to justify them. In one congregation, when I suggested that we have an every member stewardship visitation, people quickly quoted Jesus' teaching about giving alms in the Sermon on the Mount as a way of justifying why we should not do the visitation. Jesus said, "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt 6:3-4). They argued that, since giving should be secret, how people use their wealth is a private matter between them and God. Money and giving should not be discussed in church.

Yet Jesus surely challenges and calls into question many norms and assumptions about money and giving. Preaching is an effective way to help people realize this. In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says that we should give alms in secret, Jesus is talking about our motivation for giving rather than the practice of giving, a distinction that many Christians gloss over. Jesus teaches against drawing attention to our giving so that we might be praised by others. Jesus is not saying that money and giving are private matters, not to be discussed in the Christian community. Jesus' own example makes this clear. Mark tells us that Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury (Mark 12:41). Jesus—and everyone else—saw those who put money into the treasury and how much they gave. Rather than a private matter, Jesus seems to consider the offering a public event, which everyone can witness. Imagine how scandalized we would be if we eliminated offering envelopes and everyone watched and saw what we put into the plate. Even worse, Jesus—and perhaps everyone else—comments on what he sees. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "this

poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mark 12:43-44). Jesus *publicly* scrutinizes and evaluates people's giving!

When preaching about money and giving involves challenging the congregation's operating assumptions and clarifying the assumptions of Jesus, change comes slowly. People must question and let go of their own assumptions and norms before they can be open to, embrace, and finally act upon the assumptions of Jesus and the norms of the Bible. This kind of preaching requires patience and a long-term perspective. It is worth the effort because these sermons lay a solid foundation on which to build.

Untangle the Bible

Of course, to authentically preach biblical assumptions and norms about money and giving, preachers and congregational leaders must know what those assumptions and norms are and be able to point to them in Scripture. As with so many subjects, the Bible includes a variety of perspectives on money and giving. "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind," Paul writes, "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7). Cheerful giving is different from the directives to "take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground" (Deut 26:2) and to "set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field" (Deut 14:22).

Preachers may need to untangle the perspectives on money and giving found in the Bible and, together with congregational leaders, determine which one(s) to emphasize in both preaching and the congregation's stewardship programming and communication. To conflate biblical perspectives, for example, by asking people to cheerfully give a tithe of first fruits and then grow in their giving, creates an approach to giving that may sound biblical but cannot be found in Scripture. A more authentic and effective approach is to select one perspective, whether that be about cheerful giving, first fruits, tithing, or growing in giving, and clearly teach and emphasize it. Only when the members of a congregation become cheerful givers might congregational leaders introduce a second biblical perspective by inviting people to give first fruits.

Sermons are enhanced when people see the congregation practicing the biblical approach to giving that the pastor preaches. For example, congregations inspire first fruits giving by making benevolence the first check written each month. The converse is also true; sermons are undermined when the congregation does not practice what is preached. So, for example, congregations that ask people to tithe need to practice tithing as they determine their support of mission beyond the congregation and the work of the greater church. By practicing the approach to giving that the pastor preaches, a congregation indicates the seriousness with which it regards biblical teaching.

Appeal to People's Best Selves

Preaching demands that preachers decide how they will approach the members of their congregations. Sermons are prepared and preached differently, depending on whether the preacher regards the members of the congregation as saints of God or considers them sinners. When the proclamation of the gospel will speak to money and giving, determining how to approach the congregation can become an easy, even subconscious decision. The way

individual members and the congregation as a whole make decisions about money and use their financial resources gives the preacher plenty of evidence for judging the hearers as saints or sinners. At some point preachers decide whether congregations are generous, whether they agree that money is a means and not an end, and whether congregations have a vision for participating in God's work of recreating and reconciling the world or are only concerned with themselves. A preacher's assessment of these kinds of issues often gets expressed in the way sermons are structured and delivered, even when the preacher does not intend to do so.

Rather than weighing the evidence and rendering a judgment, Jesus would have preachers use a different approach. Paul reminds us how Jesus approached us: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly… God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:6-8). Jesus' example invites preachers to regard their hearers, first and foremost, as those for whom Christ died. Preachers will then approach their congregations as God's beloved children. They will strive not to hold people's attitudes and actions about money and giving, which compete with and contradict the gospel, against them. In both the form and delivery of their sermons, preachers will consciously appeal to people's best selves.

Appealing to people's best selves does not mean ignoring or overlooking stinginess, ingratitude, preoccupation with money, or concern only for the self. However, rather than chastising, preachers appeal to people's best selves when they assume that most people care about others and want to give generously. This assumption leads preachers to explore what keeps people from giving and what other values compete with their concern for others. Are people struggling to make ends meet? Are they afraid of not having sufficient financial resources for the future? Is their self-worth somehow tied up in their financial status? Some parishioners report that the most helpful sermons are those in which the preacher authentically addresses the struggles to be faithful stewards.

Preaching is Not Enough

Finally, a single sermon and even preaching by itself are not enough to help Christians respond to God by using their money in ways congruent with the gospel. Preaching needs to be partnered with other congregational activities. Even Jesus complemented his preaching with signs and miracles, acts of healing and forgiveness, and personal interactions. Ultimately, Jesus embodied his preaching by dying on a cross and rising from a tomb.

Preachers and congregational leaders need to plan ways to complement preaching about stewardship and money with other congregational activities, particularly the congregation's stewardship emphasis. I also wonder how the offering in worship might be employed as an embodied word, and the testimony of others might add authenticity to preaching on stewardship.

By making stewardship, however it is defined, a consequence of rather than a replacement for the proclamation of the gospel in the Sunday sermon, preachers can help their hearers to receive the good news that Jesus is concerned with every area of their lives, and that in faith, we can use everything in our lives to praise God and participate in God's work of bringing life to the world.

Music and Stewardship: An Economy of Breath

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Often the words "music" and "stewardship" are thrown together when religious communities are trying to decide whether or not to purchase a musical instrument. "To spend $500,000 on a pipe organ is simply not good stewardship," the business-minded congregant warns, hoping that others too might perceive the cost out of proportion to the actual value of music in their midst. It is possible to argue the issue on these pages, but the opportunity will be bypassed.

Linking the words could push one to another set of questions. Since many Lutherans are finding their way into two new resources for worship, the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*,[1] and the *Lutheran Service Book,*[2] we may want to take a close look at the hymns these books offer around the theme of stewardship. While that opportunity also will be bypassed, it is worth noting that in both books the sections on stewardship have increased in size over against their respective predecessors.[3] Further, even though a few new texts have been added in each volume, neither collection contains a hymn that uses the word "money," though "first fruits," "treasure-store," and "silver and gold" have their traditional places. As might be expected, the hymns as a whole offer the singer abundant invitations to give thanks and praise, even as they exhort worshipers to present their hearts and wills to God.

A quick perusal of these resources makes one wonder whether the hymnody reflects a poverty of stewardly piety among Lutheran Christians, that is, have we both (a) reduced a sense of stewardship to giving of thanks or to making monetary pledges—all the while fearful to bless the word "money"—and (b) fallen behind in anchoring the attitude and practice of stewardship in the fundamental stirrings of faith?

In another essay in this volume I linked stewardship to the meal liturgy,

1. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, recommended for use by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006). Hereafter cited as *ELW*.

2. *Lutheran Service Book*, prepared by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006). Hereafter cited as *LSB*.

3. The *ELW* contains a section of 18 stewardship hymns while there are 12 hymns for stewardship in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, prepared by the churches participating in the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978). *LSB* has a stewardship section of 8 hymns while there are 4 hymns for stewardship in *Lutheran Worship*, prepared by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982).

making a case for the economy of the Eucharistic table as engine for sharing with others what is ours by grace. Here, as an opportunity both to probe the very core of the musical impulse and to attempt construction of a theological foothold for stewardly piety in the first article of the Creed, I propose to look at the economy of breath as impulse and framework for living, with stewardship always in the foreground.

Holy Breath

The apostle Paul urges believers in Corinth (1 Cor 6:19) to remember that their bodies are "temples" of the Holy Spirit (or, we might say "Holy Breath"). This is not the only place he uses that image. Elsewhere (1 Cor 3:17) he employs temple imagery to refer to the believers corporately, as a whole, but here in 6:19 he understands each person to be a temple housing and depending on the Holy Breath. By linking life in the body to divine breath Paul aligns himself with a long biblical tradition that begins in Genesis. There (2:7) the writer calls attention to God's immediate participation in the appearance of humans on this earth: "then the LORD God formed the human of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Years after that was written, saintly Job boldly declared his integrity by appealing to this article of faith: "as long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood" (27:3).

Biologically we may want to describe the origins of life in slightly different ways, just as physiologically we describe the process of breathing in humans with language that appears to us as more sophisticated. Nonetheless, breathing is central to what it means to be alive. Without breath there is death. Mechanisms that deliver breath to the body are essential to living. The rhythms of inhalation/exhalation sustain all other organs and provide for us the experience of being alive. This much is clear: life as we humans know it is intimately tied up with breath and breathing.

It is reasonable to expect that some would associate the sense of life that comes from breathing with God's presence and initiative. With some further thought it becomes clear that how one manages breath and breathing has consequences. The management of breathing proceeds with a certain economy that ultimately, we will note later, impinges upon aspects of living by oneself and with others. Some management of breathing is built-in, as when one increases physical activity the breathing rate increases. But it is also possible to will alterations, like "holding one's breath." Willful management introduces responsibility, and that responsibility has

implications for related facets of life.

Breathing is integral to music. We learn early on that altering the natural flow of breath creates sounds, sounds that reward us with mother's milk or make known our discomforts. Gradually these manipulations of the breathing mechanisms enable speech and provide skills at communication. With further coaching we humans can color our speech by stressing vowel sounds, and soon comes song and music. Breath then has teamed up with vocal chords so as to generate expressions of deep feeling. These bring pleasure to us individually, even as they entice us to join with others in singing together, activities by which we recognize ourselves to be most truly human. Breath leads to sound and with that one has entered social space.

In addition to manipulating the vocal chords humans have deployed breath in other ways to produce sound. Brass players direct their breath to a focal point on the lips so as to produce a buzzing sound that, once amplified in the cups of mouthpieces, is sent through carefully gauged tubing. Woodwind players create their own sonic contributions by channeling breath over pieces of supple cane that come alive with vibrations uniquely colored in the bores of their horns. The function of breath and its manipulation in the world of instrumentalists is at the core of their artistry. Wind players spend countless hours learning how to control their breath with their diaphragms. The more advanced players master the skill of circular breathing, a way to breathe while continuing to play. Some of the best strive for even more endurance by blowing up balloons with very stiff resistance.

Far more important than those exercises, however, is the skill of managing the inhalation/exhalation process as the matrix for coaxing a musical line to life. Wind players and singers soon learn that musical lines come to life as a result of inhalation. Inhalation is essential to the birth of the phrase. For most accomplished musicians the music begins with inhalation, it is the sign that silence has ended and the music has begun. In the moment of inhalation the music maker enters the process, focuses, and lets herself be servant to the rhythm and flow of what is to happen.

During a recent master class in conducting with Helmut Rilling at the Oregon Bach Festival maestro Rilling sternly reprimanded one student conductor for failing to help the wind players begin a piece. "You must breathe with them," he insisted, "and *that* more than placement of the stick [baton] will help them to begin together. You don't even need the stick," he went on, "if you look into their eyes and visibly take a breath."

The maestro's observations are obviously true for wind players as well as for singers. How about the strings and percussionists? They require no less. Anyone who has sat in the midst of an orchestra knows that string players bring their focus to a musical phrase just like their wind-blowing colleagues. They may inhale with their mind only, but usually you can hear their nasal inhalations as if the strings were to come alive without the bow. Percussionists and keyboardists follow like patterns. The rhythm of inhalation/exhalation is central to the making of music. While its significance on one level has to do with the physics of sound and its production, on a deeper level the significance of breath and breathing centers in the nature of music as natural and automatic response to the intake of breath.

Breathing Together

The point of the maestro's advice was to assist several people to breathe together in order to have better ensemble. Music is by

nature a communal activity. Of course, in some sense music occurs even when one is alone: ipods suggest the musical experience can be singular, even as practice periods yield personal musical rewards. In the end, however, these experiences are always "music in some sense," for practice periods are preparations to protect the communal event from unnecessary individual technical repairs, while recordings are just that, a record of something that has already happened, a flattened reproduction of a communal event that has long ago ceased.

In evaluating musical experience, the importance of ensemble, that is, the group of music makers themselves, is too often taken for granted. But in fact the way social relationships unfold within any musical ensemble, the bonds that bring and hold them together determine the nature of the music making. Music is a political act. [4] Just so leaders of musical groups strive to strengthen a sense of unity within the group and realize that such unity is co-dependent with the music making itself.[5] The chief manifestation of such unity is the way an ensemble breathes as a single body. For that reason Wilhelm Ehmann, former director of the world-famous choir from the church music school in Herford, Germany, attributed the success of his group in part to a segment of training during which the choir hiked together in order to learn the skills of breathing as a single entity.[6]

Take a deep breath. This is going somewhere and that somewhere has to do with stewardship.

In the very last verse of the entire Psalter (Ps 150:6) the psalmist writes (sings) these words: "Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" Literally the words read: "All breathings praise Yahweh! Praise Yahweh!" The inhalation/exhalation cycle is to praise Yahweh. That can be taken to mean that all animals and plants (in a sense plants have their own cycles of "breathing") are to join in praise. Given Jesus' words during his entrance into Jerusalem, praise too can emanate from other parts of creation, even stones, for they too can "shout" when their Lord is present (Luke 19:40).

The psalmist lays out a vision that is given new life in the book of Revelation. There we read that "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing: To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" (5:13-14). The "breathings" from every creature converge in their honor and glory for the creator in a way that affirms and reveals creation's ultimate vocation. Not to be missed here is the unique gift humans possess as they, anticipating the envisioned cosmic *Finale*, tune their "breathings" toward unison. They can willfully control their breathings, they can give voice to concept and feeling, they can invent sonic experiences that enact their life in community. In short, they can decide to engage in the song of the vision now.

4. In music, especially choral music, "everybody has to listen to everyone else and move forward together; it doesn't just symbolize unity, it enacts it. And there is more…singing…is a political act." Nicholas Cook, *Music A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80.

5. Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music. Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 206. The author writes: "the deep meaning of my singing is guaranteed only by your participation, your bonding with me. I sing with you and others not so as to win but to affirm mutual investments in belief systems."

6. Wilhelm Ehmann, *Choral Directing* (trans. George D. Wiebe: Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 80-81.

In our time most of music is made *for* us, no matter our tastes. Downloads, event-concerts by big name stars, amplified singers at sports events, radio stations of all kinds, greeting cards with chips, choir anthems with pre-recorded accompaniments, and a host of other like signs of music as business discourage us from asking what values and benefits might be associated with self-made music. Some rise above the tide. A French physician and auditory neurophysiologist with the name of Alfred A. Tomatis has drawn attention to the fact that the "ear and the human organs that produce vocalization comprise the same 'neurological loop,' whereby changes in the activity and receptivity of one directly appear in the functioning of the other."[7] Tomatis believes that because of the interaction between auditory vibrations in the eardrum and parasympathetic nerves throughout the body many of the body's organs are regulated by the ear (and sound). For the system to function well, he has observed, the body needs to be upright, in vertical posture. According to Tomatis, it seems that the integration apparently designed into the "loop" best works its intended health and sense of well-being when the body is making its own sounds and when active listening is in place. Active listening is a key component in his remapping of the ear. Such listening is what singers do in a choir, it's what any musician in ensemble exercises so as to hear the invitation and tonal journey of the other, make one's own contribution and seek the harmonious wholeness of the larger body. Because such listening is focused, requiring considerable concentration and alertness, it happens best when standing. Listening is to be distinguished from simple hearing, Tomatis points out, and is a path to gaining healthy consciousness of self.[8]

Tomatis's research has been embraced by many of his peers. Reportedly its practical application continues to yield positive results.[9] In his own way he offers a vocabulary and framework for further probing the economy of breath.

Giving glory and praise to God through one's own voice is the goal of the psalmist's exhortation. For the person of faith such music-making fulfills our vocations as those in whom the breath of God has taken residence through the rhythm of inhalation/exhalation. That's significant in and by itself. But there is more. Tomatis holds that sounding one's voice in song is healthy for one's body and spirit. What the psalmist prescribes additionally turns out to be healthy. Now if all the pieces are in place, then the believing music maker has added yet another skill to a growing arsenal, and that is active listening. A fully looped sound maker no longer simply hears haphazard, indistinct, and unrelated vibrations outside of herself, but rather strives to make sense out of the vibrations by listening to them with care.

Breathing and Listening

Listening is what Jesus wants of those who follow. Hearing the cries of God's people is what led God to the manger. God is the first active listener. Listening occurs in the body of the individual believer but it occurs also in the body of Christ, the church. As sound maker the body of Christ hears not noise and static out there but hears rather outbursts of hunger pangs, the anguished cries of those who mourn the loss of their own lives or the lives of dear ones, the moans of those lost on the

7. As reported by Bruce T. Morrill, "Liturgical Music: Bodies Proclaiming and Responding to the Word of God," *Worship* 74/1 (January 2000), 27.

8. Ibid., 29.

9. Ibid., 27, n. 21.

way, even the silence of those who have had their voices taken from them. From those sounds and silences arises the need to reconstruct the ensemble, to find the tune again, to take a deep breath affirming God's Holy Breath in the midst of the disarray, and to boldly make a sound for the health of all bodies.

What is heard and how it is heard constitutes in some ways the subject of a book entitled *Noise* by Jacques Attali, French economist and sociologist.[10] His purpose is to open up a new perspective on music history by understanding it as a history of economics with all the political overtones that accompany such a project. Music, asserts Attali, is a way of perceiving the world. Music is therefore not a commodity, though its history shows how it was time and again captured for entrepreneurial purposes. In Attali's view music provides an antidote to the noise of violence in the world.[11] Music exists to keep noise under control, it channels noise (and violence), and therefore is a tool of power unprotected from anyone who imagines self-serving purposes for it. Over the years music has been employed to control noise in four different ways, each with economic implications. First, music accompanies sacrifice, later becoming the sacrifice itself, in order to make people forget the violence of the world (*Sacrificing*). Second, it makes people believe that there is harmony in the world when there really isn't (*Representing*). Then, it silences the people altogether through the tools and processes of reproduction (*Repeating*). And finally, it emerges with its intended purpose of belonging to all in order to put things back together again (*Composing*).

> Singing attentively is of the same DNA as a life that oversees the economy of one's gifts and talents.

Stewardship as an Economy of Breath

Each of the stages has economic overtones, such as in the second stage the monetary control over music exercised by those with the wherewithal to hire professional performance groups for their own enjoyment. The economic dimensions need not concern us here. Rather, two insights of Attali's shed further light on the economy of breath proposed in the preceding paragraphs.

First, inattentive hearing of life's vibrations is not without consequences, Attali seems to suggest; for without active listening the vibrations of life so pollute one's hearing that they in fact invite us into the violence, drive us to disregard our deafness, or move us to find any way to shut them out. The economy of breath stands in opposition to such pollution, or, better, it seeks to reduce the noise of violence by seeking anew to elicit a song from the noise.

And that brings us to the second insight. Attali finds some comfort in the

10. Jacques Attali, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, *Theory and History of Literature,* Vol. 16 (ed. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse; trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

11. Ibid., 19.

return to "composing"—the process, he explains, of putting things back together. He finds that people are singing once again (think Karaoke and YouTube), that people are playing instruments for their own enjoyment, that there is increasing interest in jazz and other improvisatory music, and that in general music is being freed from the shackles of profit makers.

In these new manifestations active listening is given the profile it deserves, inviting people to pay attention to both the music *and* the noise in the vicinity of their own sound making. Just why this "composing" is making a comeback is unclear, perhaps irrelevant here. If in fact composing is gaining ground then we are witnessing the return of the joy that accompanies people discovering the rewards of breath turning to sound. Might we look too for an increase of those who are waiting to translate active listening into action?

Stewardship for Christian individuals and congregations usually translates into programs, pledge Sundays, and efforts at helping people understand the theology of gift giving. These tools are not to be disparaged, but they look for a fresh dose of life. Stewardship can be neither compartmentalized nor occasional. Like music it presents the believer with a way of perceiving the world and is therefore a matter of the mind, spirit, and heart, even as it is a matter of breath, sound, and listening.

Here it has been proposed to think of stewardship as an economy, specifically an economy of breath. Some proposals have emerged here and are advanced for testing and evaluation. They resist precise declamation, but here is an attempt.

- To think of stewardship as an economy of breath is more than a metaphor; the act of breathing and breathing breaking into sound is a microcosm of stewardship. Singing attentively is of the same DNA as a life that oversees the economy of one's gifts and talents. Hence, getting people to sing in assembly impacts how people manage the household of gifts God has given them.
- Stewardship is a process of exhalation by which one uses sound to tune and tone the body for attentiveness to the noises of dissonance and to the need for the whole world to be harmonious. Stewardship relies on inhalation, or better, that first inhalation reported in Genesis by which God brings each of us to life. Inhalation/exhalation is the rhythm of life. When it ceases, we have come to believe, Holy Breath inhales for us again in ways unknown, and the song and the stewardship go on.
- Stewardship is a result of active listening and is already in operation as one sings in the assembly, even as it serves as the generator for decisions and actions that change noise and violence into ensemble.
- What of those who cannot sing or will not sing? Too large a subject to be taken up here, but John Bell has said that the actual number of those who cannot sing is minuscule and localized largely in European and American culture. A choice not to sing is more psychological than it is physical and is made for reasons that usually affect stewardship as well.[12] In the final analysis we sing because we can, just like we give because we can.[13] Both take breath, breath managed by people who have been born anew by the Holy Breath of God.

12. John Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2000), 96. Bell describes the particular difficulty as "vocal disenfranchisement."

13. Ibid., 16.

A Money Autobiography

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Consider the following scenarios. There is a disaster in your community and opportunities for giving donations abound. What is your response? You receive a cash gift of $50.00 for your birthday. What do you do with it? The offering plates are being passed through the congregation. What is your experience when it comes to your hands? A pre-approved credit card application arrives in the mail. Your discretionary cash is low right now and your cell phone has just quit working. You have just seen the newest one with all the features you'd like to have advertised on sale. What do you do with the application?

If you have ever wondered why you respond the way you do to a situation that involves money, you have at least in part been thinking about matters of "formation"! Through the journey of your life you have accumulated many messages about money. How do you make your choices for earning, spending, giving, saving, and investing money? These messages have come from your parents and family, advertisers, teachers, the culture around you, and your faith community. All of these messages have contributed to forming you in your attitudes, choices, and actions in relation to the role of money in your life.

A "Money Autobiography" is a tool, or a process, for assisting you to reflect on the story of formation in your life in relationship to money. It is not a program or a course of study. There is not a single way to do it. Various forms, processes, inventories, and exercises exist and can be found through Web searches. The intent of each is to provide a path for you to discover more clearly your relationship to money, and how it has been formed during your lifetime. In the course of writing a money autobiography, some discover that money controls them. Others discover that they control money. We can also ask: "Where is God in the midst of this? What is God's desire for me in relationship to money?" There is a kind of adventure in discovery process!

The Bible reveals to us that we are children of a generous, gracious, merciful, and forgiving God. As those who seek to embrace our baptismal calling, living as children of God, our lives are to reflect the God who loves us, claims us, and sends us into the world to live and love each other as God loves us. To love each other as God loves us includes being generous, as God is generous. Our brokenness often causes us to revert to self-centered and selfish ways, contrary to even our own best desires and intentions. Why does this happen? An awareness of our formation in relationship to money can provide some clues to understanding the answer to this question during our journey of life, faith, and relationships in which we desire for these attributes of God to become manifest in our daily living.

As you begin writing your money

autobiography (and this is a story only you can write), it is important to acknowledge that reflecting on your story using the following prompts, questions, and memory probes may seem uncomfortable. Formation in relation to money often includes the overt or covert message that you are not to think about these things or talk about them outside the family. Many local churches have also honored this practice in the life of the congregation. If you are feeling uncomfortable, please be reminded that what you remember, answer, and ponder in this exercise is only for your own well-being. It is not intended to be shared with others except at your choosing. You engage in this process for your own self-awareness. The gift of self-awareness can, however, be experienced as a key to a new realm of freedom and discovery: "Oh, that is why I do/say/think this way in a particular situation!" Especially as one may seek to grow the capacity to be a "cheerful giver," this self-awareness can become truly significant.

In anticipation of beginning the "Money Autobiography" exercise, it is helpful to establish a time, place, and environment that is inviting for you. You know yourself. Create an occasion that is inviting for you—one that offers the conditions that make it safe for you to remember, recall, and reflect on the stories and events of your life. You may set aside one longer session or several modest periods of time. Come prepared with your laptop, keyboard, or journal and pen. Attend to your physical needs—it is helpful to give some of the best hours of your waking energy to do this. Provide for those things which encourage and invite personal engagement with this reflecting and writing exercise, for example, an indoor/outdoor setting, easy chair/desk chair, beverage, snacks/fasting, or music/silence.

When the time comes to begin reflecting and writing, it is a great blessing to begin prayerfully, remembering that God is in the midst of your story. Remember also that the God who created you and loves you, longs for your health and well-being even more than you do. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you that the insights gained will contribute to your health and well-being. "Resting in" Scripture will also contribute to opening yourself to this process. In Matthew 6:19-22, Jesus teaches that we should "…not store up for yourselves treasures on earth… For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The money autobiography contributes to fostering this unity of heart and treasure in God!

Are you ready? Take each of the story prompts, questions, or memory probes one after another and write in narrative form the scenes, experiences, and feelings that come to mind. Remember, this is your money story. There are no right or wrong answers; simply note the experiences and feelings that come to mind. If you are one for whom writing narrative does not work, and sketching or another form of writing does work, then use that approach. The intention is to record your responses in a way that is helpful and meaningful for you.

Reflect on the following!

A. The context into which you were born:

1. Describe, according to stories you remember, the time into which you were born. What were the economic conditions of the country while you were growing up? Was it wartime or peacetime? Prosperity or depression? What have you heard about how this impacted your family?
2. Describe the family configuration into which you were born: Two

parents? A single parent? Adoptive parents? Foster parents? Other siblings? Presence of grandparents? Pay particular attention and note your emotional and intellectual reactions as you write about this.

3. Describe your first home as best you can remember, noting how early the memory is. Did you live in a house or apartment? Was it large or small? In a town, city, farm, or another country? Did you have your own room or did you share a room? How did this change over the years? What were your thoughts and feelings about your home?
4. What was the prevailing attitude about money in your growing up years: Never enough? Plenty? Not talked about? Talked about openly?
5. What are your early memories of family holidays? Vacations? Shopping trips? What money messages do you associate with these memories?

B. The reality of money for you as you grew up:

6. How did you come to have money in your possession as a child: Did you receive an allowance? Ask for it? Work for it? Was it given to you as you needed it? Were you comfortable with this system? Did you wish it were different? How did the possession of money happen for your friends?
7. When did you open your first bank account? What spoken or unspoken messages did you hear from your parents as you did this? Was it at their initiative or your own?
8. Recall events and experiences from high school that involved things like clothes, cars, friends, parties, dates, sports, and grades. What associations do the memories have to money? What about fashions, books, movies, ads, or trends of the time? Was money available for you to be "in style"? How did you get the money? Note the intensity, or lack there of, of your memories about this. Was this a topic of conversation between you and your parent(s)?

C. The influence of money as you moved into post-high school life:

9. Did you go to college? Graduate school? Was money provided for your education? Did you receive scholarship funds? Did you work to pay for tuition? How did you feel about money during those years?
10. Describe your first job and how much you earned. Did you choose the job for the kind of work or for the paycheck? Was it the job of your dreams or someone else's dream? Recall the significance of those first paychecks. Whose voice did you hear in your mind as you decided how to spend them?
11. What was your experience of paying your own expenses? Making your first investment? Buying your first car? Renting your first apartment? Buying your first house? Are there memories that come to the forefront? Allow the feelings to resurface. What were your fears? Can you now correlate your feelings with situations you remember your parent(s) experiencing? Is your response similar to or different from your parent(s)?
12. Next describe your career, growing your business, marrying, starting a family, raising children, etc. When you think about these times with regard to money, what is your sense of freedom and joy? Of bondage and fear?

D. Your life of faith in God and the role of money:

13. What are your memories of religious experiences in your community: sac-

raments, bar mitzvahs, celebrations, revivals, or funerals? Make note of any special words you remember being said to you during these times.

14. Who taught you how to give? Begin to recall any activity or conversations you experienced that included making contributions to religious institutions and giving to social and charitable causes. What adjectives describe your recollections? What role, if any, do you remember your parent(s) having in these situations? Were you taught particular practices?
15. What do you remember being taught about how much to put in the offering plate? Who taught this to you? What attitudes do you recall being associated with this? Obligation? Joy? What kind of memories are these? Pleasant? Unpleasant?
16. Do your memories so far match with what you were taught to believe about God? As you remember the people who were teaching you this and the way you observed them living their lives, what words or phrases describe the congruency (or lack thereof) of the words and actions you witnessed. Reflect on how this influenced you.

E. Your relationship with money:

17. How has your gender affected your relationship with money? Recall assumptions you may have learned about who pays for what? Did you ever experience gender discrimination with regard to hourly wages?
18. Think about the amount of money you had as a teenager. How does the amount of money you had relate to your feelings of self-worth? Did it impact your dating practices and choices?
19. When did you receive your first credit card? What did you believe it could do for you? How has it been a blessing? A problem?
20. Describe what it is like for you to have a conversation about money that includes things like the influence of money in your life, your attitudes about it, your habits in spending, your patterns for giving it to others, and your patterns for saving?
21. What would you like to experience differently in your relationship with money? Is this a new or longstanding desire? What prevents you from experiencing it? What inspires you to claim and grow into this relationship?
22. Jesus teaches that where one's treasure is, there will be one's heart also; where is your treasure and where is your heart? Are they where you long for them to be?
23. What do you sense the Holy Spirit may be leading you to see differently in your relationship with money?

F. Money messages:

24. What are the things you remember hearing about generous giving (and tithing as one expression of that) during your growing-up years? During your young-adult years? During your adult years? What were the attitudes you associated with the ones you remember who were doing the talking? What do you recall about your own attitudes while you listened?
25. Is there a time when you received a generous cash gift? What are the messages that you hear as you recall deciding how to use the money? Who is sending those messages?
26. What are the proverbs, maxims, one-liners, and spoken (or unspoken) instructions about money that you heard while you were growing up? Drift off to times when large amounts of money needed to be spent for something. Or, when someone was out of work, or, when you asked for

something that seemed okay for you to ask for but your parent(s) thought it to be extravagant.

27. Describe a time when you were aware of, and sensitive to, the reality that you had more money than your friends, or your neighbors, or others in the world. What was your experience of God in the midst of that experience? If you had no sense of God's presence at that time, ponder it from that perspective now.
28. Ponder the legacy regarding money that you received during your lifetime. What additions or subtractions would you want to make as you pass this legacy to the next generation (whether members of your family or parishioners in your congregation)?
29. Have you prayed about money? If so, what prayers about money have you prayed? What has been your experience as your prayers have been answered? If not, ponder why you have not prayed about money. Are you aware of particular messages from the past that contribute to not praying about money?
30. What memories do you associate with "God loves a cheerful giver"? How does this biblical quotation resonate with you, your relationship with money, and your faith in God?

You have just skimmed, read, and engaged with thirty prompts, questions, and opportunities for reflection. There could have been more or less. Dutifully answering each one is not really the goal. It may be that after you have thought about only a few or about all of them that the real blessing of this exercise begins to bear fruit.

Talking about your Money Autobiography with a trusted confidant, friend, spiritual director, or pastor will increase its potential to bear fruit in your life. To entrust your story to another person creates "holy ground" at which the presence of the Holy Spirit can not only be felt, but experienced as empowering in the ongoing work of discerning the meaning for your daily life and daily work. You may ask such a person to simply listen and pray, or you may invite questions. Remember that this is your story. It is not to be criticized. It is to be received for what it is, to allow the creative and life-giving work of the Holy Spirit to flow so that God may be glorified in your life.

The Holy Spirit promises to be at work in, through, and beyond the process for the purpose of attuning your life more closely to Jesus Christ. As we grow in desire and capacity to open our lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit in relationship to money, we know not where it will lead—except we really do. We will be led to reflect all the more the compassionate care and generosity of God as God has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Insofar as past formation, which causes us to be limited or even bound to the past, is loosened and lessened in power, our lives are freed to let our treasure be with God alone. Money can become a servant in the life of the baptized, "bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 231).

The Congregational Money Profile: The Stories Behind the Numbers

Connie M. Kleingartner, 1948-2008

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Editors' Note

Connie Kleingartner intended this congregational resource to appear in an easy-to-distribute pamphlet. She ended the essay with a footnote inviting church leaders to contact her to share their experiences of using the Congregational Money Profile tool and to make suggestions for improving it. The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation staff invites and encourages input on the use of such tools in working with congregations (tithing@lstc.edu) as the staff seeks to develop creative and useful resources for church leaders and congregations.

"Then why do we need to really believe that God is leading us and will always be there for us?" Martha retorted curtly to Harry's statement, "Good stewards need to manage their money well and always count the cost before beginning a new ministry." And, so, the congregation council fight continued along familiar and well-worn lines of argument between two dedicated and faithful leaders. Harry, who had grown up during the Depression, knew what was necessary to live through hard times. He also remembered the time the congregation almost had to close its doors because "some fools" had convinced the congregation to go ahead and re-side the church building and trust that the money would come in. On the other hand, Martha was convinced that if it was God's will, faith demanded that people step out in faith. After long discussions and much prayer between her and her husband, she had just resigned from a management job to stay home and take care of their newborn twins, and her family was making it just fine. Besides, if the congregation waited for all the details of each new ministry to be worked out before it was started—like the "sticks in the mud" wanted—the church for her would be dead.

Harry and Martha's debate represented the place the congregation seemed to always "get stuck" in money discussions. It is the place where members often started to quote Scripture *at* one another and talk *to,* rather than *with,* one another. What is often missing in such debates is the discussion *beneath* the discussion—a discussion of values, different views of the role of money in our individual lives and our life together, and the signs of faithful stewardship practices. Often people do not have the words and are not practiced in articulating core beliefs at this level of discussion. This is where doing a Congregational Money Profile (CMP) can be useful. It is a simple, engaging, and interactive way to get to know a congregation's history and its attitudes toward money, finance, and stewardship.

The CMP uses systems and narrative theories of leadership to help a congregation and its individual members name

and explore the patterns of how they manage both human resources and financial resources. It gives voice to the stories behind myriad numbers which surround the human resources and dollars involved in congregational life. It is a simple way to unveil the different core values and understandings of the role of money that exist among congregational members. Creating a CMP can be a fun way to begin conversations about stewardship. This is also an easy way for a pastor who is new to a congregation to quickly learn about congregational attitudes toward ministry and stewardship.

Preparing for the Event

The first step in the planning process is for pastors to read through the process presented in this essay three or four times in order to become familiar with it. The second step is to *recruit volunteers* to assist in the CMP process. Volunteers are needed in three areas: food serving, children's education and care, and leading the process.

The CMP is designed to work in conjunction with a simple meal that includes three distinct courses: appetizers, entree, and dessert. Although those attending may help provide the food, a separate group of three to four servers should be recruited to set-up and serve the food. These volunteers will not be able to participate in the process during the evening in which they help serve food. A simple meal is best so that the focus remains on the process, not the food. One suggested menu is salad, lasagna, and ice cream bars. Another is fresh veggies with dip, soup with bread, and fresh fruit.

The CMP process is open to all members of the congregation who can vote and/or who are expected to tithe. Usually this does not include children. However, all family members are invited and the time frame does provide an excellent opportunity to do stewardship education with those children four years and older. The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation has some excellent resources available to assist teams with planning activities for children. Younger children will need childcare providers. As always, having at least one supervising adult is key. Those who agree to work with the children will not be able to participate in the process during the evening in which they serve in this way.

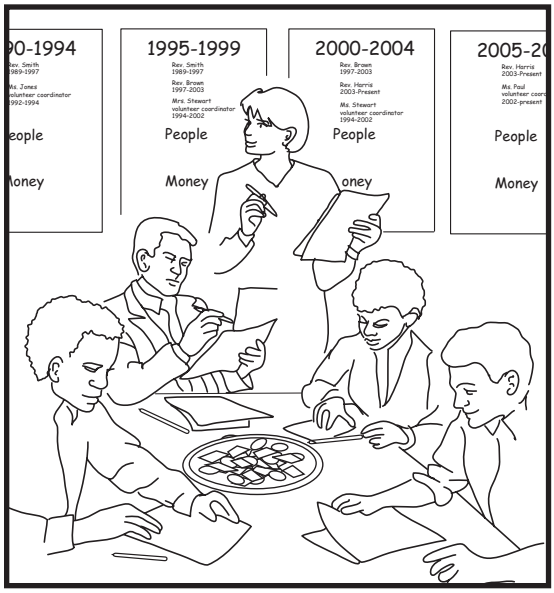
To model the principle that congregational stewardship is the work of the entire congregation, five to seven people are recruited for the leadership team. The specific tasks asked of the team include publicity, set-up, process leadership, reflection, and report back to the congregation. If there is not an established group such as a stewardship team to take on this task, pastors can recruit individuals for this group. One of the most important members of the team will be the timekeeper. In order to keep the process manageable and to respect the significant time commitment of the participants of all ages, the timekeeper needs to graciously but firmly be able to move the process forward. It is vital to start and end on time. The group will need the entire three hours. One sign of a successful event is that attendees continue to talk about the evening beyond the event.

The leadership team is asked to give ten to fifteen hours of time over a ten-week period. The purpose of the first one-hour meeting is to review the entire process as a team. The second meeting is to help those who will plan and direct the CMP event to become familiar with the narrative process involved in this stewardship approach. Each leader should write out her/his own Money Autobiography before the second meeting (see article by Ginger Anderson-Larson in this issue of *Currents*).

It is vital that each member of the team shares discoveries from taking the Money Autobiography with at least one other person on the CMP leadership team; this sharing may be of stories remembered from family life or current life situations. These stories often range from hilarious to painful and poignant. Note the similarities and differences among these stories. For most of us, our attitudes about money were formed in our family of origin. This is a gift, since it means we can revise, relearn, or re-emphasize these attitudes. The team should discuss how these differences and similarities have lived themselves out in the stewardship and budgeting decisions of each individual, each family unit, and the congregation. Does the range of responses of the leadership team represent the expected ranges of the congregation? Finally, summarize the learning that may be taken from this conversation. This process of learning from the individual Money Autobiography will be mirrored in the CMP. Spend time reviewing the CMP process. The third meeting will be the night of the CMP. The fourth meeting will be the follow-up and reflection meeting.

Prepare congregational members to participate in the CMP by newsletter and bulletin announcements starting about six weeks before the event. Let them know that the process will take approximately three hours and includes a meal. Explanations offered orally during announcements are best made by a person from the congregational leadership team, so that it is clear that they support this process. It is also helpful for leaders of the event to speak personally with others about their enthusiasm for the process and to seek out those who may need a personal welcome to encourage their participation.

This process works best with groups of between 35 to 50 people. In large congregations it is best to do this process over several nights within a small time frame with groups of around 50. It has been this author's experience that after the first evening, members come knowing the process and are eager to participate—an encouraging sign that the congregation is buzzing about the process. Set the room with tables that hold six to eight people, preferably using round tables. On the walls of the room, hang large sheets of paper, one for each five years of the church's existence. For congregations with a very long history, going back 35–40 years will be sufficient. It is easiest for participants if one uses the years divisible by five. For example, 1990–1994, 1995–1999, 2000–2004, followed by 2005–2008 are the last four poster sheets. The time period is written across the top followed by the names of all of the paid



staff people who served during that time. Below that list add the words "people" and "money."

When families arrive, invite them to take the children and youth to their area and to get settled. As couples arrive, encourage them to divide up and sit at different tables. At each table setting there should be several pieces of blank paper and a marker.

Appetizers

Welcome the group and open with a prayer for the gathering. Explain the process and give thanks for the food. Let the group know that you are asking them to eat and to work at the same time. Invite people to begin to eat the appetizers that have been placed in the middle of the table. To "whet their appetite" for the evening's conversation, let them know that you will be asking them a series of questions about the congregation's current finances. Each person will write down his or her answer to the questions individually. Encourage people who claim to have no idea about the answer to write their "best hunch." Remind them that this is not a test, but rather a way to begin thinking about the congregation and its resources. It works better to ask the questions verbally rather than in a written format. A written format feels too much like a test where only correct answers matter. Generally, there will be some humor, as well as moaning and groaning about the questions.

Questions:

- How many people are currently members of the congregation?
- What is the average attendance at all services in a typical week?
- What is the current congregational budget?
- How much did the congregation take in totally last year?
- What percent of the current budget is designated for salary and benefits?
- What percent of the current budget is designated for program money?
- What percent of the current budget is designated for benevolence and outreach?
- Are benevolence and outreach monies sent to designated recipients monthly, quarterly, or as the congregation is able?
- What is the insured value of the church's property and grounds?
- How much money is in the congregation's endowment, restricted or specially designated funds?
- How much can the leadership team spend on non-budgeted items without congregational approval?
- How much can the pastor spend on non-budgeted items without congregational approval?

When you have finished asking the questions, give each table a list of the questions and invite each person to share her/his answers with tablemates. Then, each table is invited to come up with the group's "best hunches," noting the range of answers and the surety level of each response. When conversation dies down, give them the data in both oral and written format followed by time for each table to talk. What data did they know/not know? Was the group's data more accurate than individual data? What other observations did they make? Invite individuals to share some of their own comments or the observations of their table with the large group. The allotted time for this part of the process is about half an hour. Take a short break during which the entrées are placed on the tables.

Main Course

To facilitate this step of the process, provide a set of sample worksheets for each person. The first worksheet contains the questions you are asking each person to

answer, accompanied by brief explanations of the questions. See the questions listed below. Each additional worksheet is to be a half-page replica of the sheets posted on the wall.

Invite people to begin eating the main course. Remind them that, again, you will be asking them to work while they eat. To set the stage for this portion of the CMP, explain that, similar to their personal finances, feeling rich or poor is more an attitude than a concrete reality. This feeling will vary between individuals and their experience of the time as well as their own attitudes about money. There is no right or wrong answer, only one's *experience* of the time. Share a few stories from your own Money Autobiography to give examples of this. Ask each person to individually reflect on the years in which she or he has been a member of the congregation. Specifically, during each five-year time period, they will be asked to reflect on the following questions:

During this time period do you remember that the congregation was:

- rich or poor in terms of people resources? That is, in terms of people resources, were there usually enough volunteers to staff the church ministries and to provide leadership and new ideas for the congregation? Place an "R" for rich or a "P" for poor after the word "people" on the worksheet.
- rich or poor in terms of money resources? Essentially, in terms of money resources, was there enough money for the congregation to do its ministry, keep up the property and pay its staff? Place an "R" for rich or a "P" for poor after the word "money" on the worksheet.
- involved in significant benevolent acts/ministries/programs? List them preceded by a star. For example, the starting of a homeless shelter would be written on the worksheets as *homeless shelter.
- involved in a major disagreement or fight? Describe the identified issue in twenty words or less. For example, "proposed remodeling of the sanctuary was voted down over arguments about the color of the carpet" would be written on the worksheet.

Recalling the dates of significant life transitions such as the year they joined the congregation or remembering significant family times such as weddings, baptisms, or buying a new home may help members to remain oriented during this process. Also, changes in staffing are often helpful prompts. After individually completing the worksheet, the data should be transferred to the sheets on the wall. Remind members that not everyone will agree on the details of every time period. Those who complete the process early can help others at their table post data on the wall sheets. Remind them to also eat the entrée! The time frame for this part of the process is 45 minutes maximum.

Dessert

When the data is posted on the hanging sheets, get the group's attention for the next set of instructions. Invite people to refresh their drinks and to read the papers posted on the walls. They should note where there is consensus or where there are differences of opinion about the congregation being "rich" or "poor," as well as patterns in the agreements and disagreements about the significant benevolent acts/ministries/programs and topics of major disagreements. Allow about fifteen minutes for this process.

Invite people to return to their tables for dessert and an opportunity to share their observations about the data on the hanging sheets. Caution them that this is not a time to debate issues but to share observations. It is also a time to talk about the congregation, its members, and their

work, not just the pastors. Converse for no more than 30 minutes. Ask the table groups to share their greatest learnings and greatest surprises in seeing the data. Offer about 15 minutes for this part of the process.

While people are discussing in table groups, add to the hanging sheets the following data:

In the space beside the word "people," write the range in the average number of people at worship over the five-year period, as well as the percentage of change.

In the space beside the word "money," write the range of the congregation's income over the five-year period, as well as the percentage of change.

In the space beside each of the sheet's "R" and "P" entries, write the percent of the total budget that was designated for benevolence and outreach ministries, as well as the percentage of change. The percentages in these two areas are reported because most congregational research understands them to be indicators of a healthy congregation.

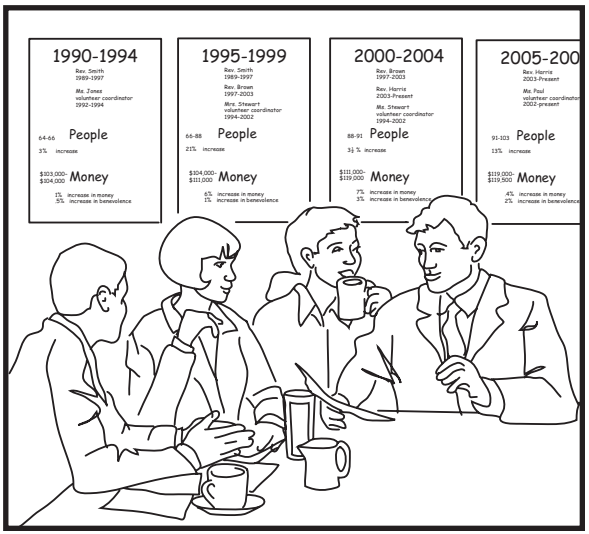
Invite people to spend another 15 minutes looking at the newly added data. Have them return to their tables and facilitate a general discussion about any new observations.

In the last minutes, thank people for their participation, stories, and observations. Let them know that you will save the data sheets and that you and the leadership team will ponder all of their input and get back to them. Close with thanks to the food servers and childcare providers as well as prayer. Distribute an evaluation form and ask everyone to fill it out before leaving. A helpful evaluation form includes the following questions: What was your greatest learning(s) or relearning(s) about the congregation through tonight's process? What was your greatest surprise(s) about the congregation through tonight's process? What will you take away from this meeting? What else do you want the leadership team to know?

After-Dinner Mints

Be sure to keep your word and do the follow-up and feedback. Gather the leadership team to reflect on the gathering in terms of both process and data. Some points to ponder include:

- What is the level of knowledge about current congregational finances and the financial processes? Did most people over-estimate or under-estimate the numbers? How do you understand these discrepancies? How will you establish educational processes, formal or informal, to address this?
- What is the level of knowledge about the current membership and the worship attendance? Did most people over-estimate



or under-estimate the numbers? How do you understand these discrepancies? How will you establish educational processes, formal or informal, to address this?

- Was there strong agreement about the times in which the congregation was rich or poor? Is there a correlation between the congregation's financial and people resources in terms of numbers and feelings? For example, you may learn that when the congregation is taking in new members, it assumes the amount of giving will go up.
- What are the patterns in terms of feeling rich or poor? For example, you may learn that the congregation feels poor when the senior pastor changes. You may learn that the congregation tends to operate with a scarcity mindset rather than an abundance mindset.
- What is the pattern in benevolent acts/programs that energize the congregation and help members feel the richness of the congregation? For example, you may learn that whenever the congregation drops a ministry, members feel poor.
- What are the identified issues over which the congregation fights? Are there patterns? Are there any underlying issues that can be discerned by these patterns? For example, you may learn that the congregation has never approved a challenge budget when they have been paying on building debt.
- Was there a strong consensus on key learning, on things people expressed were surprises, and other shared insights that members will take away from this process?
- How did the narrative or storytelling approach allow people who usually do not speak at meetings an opportunity to participate more fully?

Be sure to keep your word and do the follow-up and feedback.

- What basic attitudes does the leadership team want to work on changing or enhancing?
- What worked well and what might be done differently?

Write out some of your conclusions and areas of need for additional information. Share this both with the elected leadership folk and the congregational pillars. Also share this with congregational members perhaps through some articles or bulletin inserts. Make plans for ongoing work in the area of stewardship.

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Book Reviews

Money, Possessions, and Eternity. By Randy Alcorn. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2002. 502 pages. $15.99.

Randy Alcorn, an evangelical pastor for 14 years, now serves as the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries. His book is divided into four sections. The first is "The Challenge of Money and Possessions." Alcorn writes about seeing money from a divine perspective. He criticizes both the excesses of asceticism and materialism. Not only does he address materialism in secular culture he also examines how it affects the church. The best part of this section is his assessment of the dangers and errors of prosperity theology.

The second part is titled "Seeing Money and Possessions in Eternity's Light." Here Alcorn employs many biblical passages to talk about the theme of money, such as the impossibility of serving two masters. He also uses parables to talk about the eternal rewards waiting for us in heaven if we use our wealth correctly. In the close of the section Alcorn proposes a pilgrim mentality where we are always think about how our actions affect our life in the next world.

The third section, titled "Giving and Sharing Our Money and Possessions," applies this vision of the future to our giving, especially to the church. Alcorn writes about tithing as the training wheels that help us to begin offering back to God. He suggests that true joy and rewards are to be found when we go above and beyond tithing to sacrificial giving. In this section he also addresses the issues of giving to the poor and the ethics of church fund-raising.

The final section is called "Handling Our Money and Possessions." Here Alcorn proposes that everything having to do with money must be done with an eternal perspective. He shares his thoughts on debt, gambling, investing, leaving inheritance, and buying insurance. He also reflects on how to battle materialism in the church family and how we should be teaching our children about giving.

The language and theology of the book are distinctively evangelical, yet other voices also find expression. There are even several quotes from Luther, for example: "I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

Pastors will appreciate the large collection of biblical passages and be challenged by the critique of several trends in modern Christianity. The book includes a study guide for each chapter. There is great material for discussion on many sensitive topics.

Angela K. Neubauer
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

A Tither's Meditation on the Psalms: Were the Psalmists Tithers? By Paul V. Berggren. Chicago: The Tithing Foundation, 1998. $5.00.

The author, Paul V. Berggren, is a Lutheran pastor who has served several congregations in the Chicago area. More recently he has served as the executive director of The Tithing Foundation. The title of this short devotional work is more descriptive than the subtitle. Rather than looking to the Psalms for an answer to the question, "Did the psalmists practice tithing?" Berggren assumes that, for the most part, they did. Their songs of praise, supplication, and even the laments reflect the generous, sacrificial, righteous heart of the tither. For Berggren, tithing is not so much a matter of mathematics or accounting as it is a posture of the heart. The Psalms model this posture for us in striking fashion.

Divided into three short booklets, Berggren's work takes the reader on a tour of the Psalms from the perspective of a committed tither. He gives page-length reflections on each and every psalm, selecting one or two key verses which serve as springboards for his meditations. The preface identifies what the author takes as a "central theme" of the Psalms, namely a deep "concern for justice." "Hands have a language of their own. The Lord's hands are open wide to all his creatures. As tithers, we sense that our Lord is calling us to have 'open hands' to all who are

hungry, cold, weak, and suffering from the many injustices that surround us" (Book 3, p. 45). He shows how the psalmists articulate this concern in various ways, committing themselves to respond by "act[ing] on behalf…of the oppressed." Such a commitment, Berggren emphasizes again and again, requires sacrifice, a practice that our culture does not encourage. We typically think of the Psalms as *songs*, for instance, of praise. Berggren contends that to hear the Psalms rightly is to hear a call to *translate* these songs of praise into *lives* of praise, lives characterized by righteous *acts*, including setting aside a tenth of our time, talent, and possessions for the building of God's kingdom.

Pastors will appreciate how basic stewardship themes in the Psalms can be further developed in sermons. Stewardship leaders and congregational members will discover in this book a devotional resource that nicely connects the financial practice of giving one-tenth of one's possessions with the spiritual practices of generosity, selflessness, and sacrifice. Berggren demonstrates how these practices are essentially linked to biblical themes of righteousness and justice.

Joseph N. Ballan
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

On the Pilgrim's Way: Christian Stewardship and the Tithe. By John K. Brackett. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1996. 109 pages. $10.99.

At the time the author wrote this book, John K. Brackett was serving as rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is a frequent lecturer on stewardship issues. In the first part of his book, Brackett discusses the theology of stewardship and the tithe. He begins by defining stewardship as the management of resources including time, talent, and money in daily life. He sees Christian stewardship as a pilgrimage and as an acknowledgement of a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ: "Faith is a willingness to turn one's history over to the God of history. It is a willingness to put one's trust in God without necessarily knowing what kind of payoff to expect" (53).

Brackett next focuses on the tithe in the Hebrew Bible. Providing an overview of a number of relevant passages, he finds theologies of obligation, devotion, gratitude, and voluntary offering. For Christians, he suggests that tithing can serve as a means to begin the pilgrim's journey by recognizing their covenant with God in Christ. He argues that tithing focuses attention on one's priorities, creates the possibility of vulnerability and risk-taking, and teaches one how to receive.

Turning to the New Testament, Brackett analyzes several parables of Jesus. He concludes that parables point to the necessity of surrendering one's self to God's will for the in-breaking of the reign of God. Noting that tithing is barely mentioned in the New Testament, he concludes that in the synoptic Gospels Christians are expected to surrender all worldly financial concerns and rely on God to provide for their needs. By contrast, the Pauline tradition emphasizes the proper use of resources according to one's faith. He argues that for Paul the tithe would have been the minimum acceptable standard for giving.

Brackett takes this Pauline approach into the second part of the book that discusses the practice of tithing. He recommends tithing the first ten percent from one's gross income, saving another ten percent, and living within the remaining eighty percent. Recipients of the tithe may include the local church, wider church ministries, the minister's discretionary fund, and charitable organizations. He also advocates planned retirement giving. While Brackett wrote this book specifically for an Episcopalian audience, he is convinced that any Christian congregation will find his work useful.

Linda R. Wimmer
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The World's Easiest Guide to Finances. By Larry Burkett. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2000. 409 pages. $19.99.

Larry Burkett was founder of Christian Financial Concepts, which later merged to become Crown Financial Ministries. He authored over seventy books and was host of several radio programs, approaching matters of personal

finance from a biblical point of view.

Similar in format to *The Dummy's Guide to X* or *The Complete Idiot's Guide to X*, the personal finance book in the "World's Easiest Guide" series gives a comprehensive, user-friendly guide to its subject with minimal jargon and without assuming much prior knowledge in the area of finance. The main text is sprinkled with features like "Glad you asked" (frequently asked questions), "Crunching the numbers" (interesting statistics), and "Penny for your thoughts" (quotes about financial matters, taken from such diverse sources as Ecclesiasticus, Emerson, and Epicurus). No one person will find the entire book useful at one time in his or her life: it includes chapters geared toward young couples, single folks, parents with college-age children, and adults approaching retirement age. The topics range from getting out of debt to investment to insurance to wills. All subjects are discussed using relatively simple language and a good sense of humor (an example is Burkett's analogy for those wishing to learn about new car investments: "1. Withdraw $20,000 from your bank account. 2. Flush $4,000 of it down the toilet.").

Those familiar with Larry Burkett's work may be surprised to learn that there is actually very little in this book that is specifically Christian. The starting point for drawing up a budget is net spendable income (defined as one's income after taxes *and* tithing), but he discusses tithing as something that "Christians do" for biblical reasons while recognizing that "other people," who may not tithe, may find fulfillment through other avenues of charitable giving (351, 319). Burkett's conservative perspective rises to the surface of the text only very occasionally, such as in his discussions of welfare and of two-career families (even in the latter case, however, he acknowledges the reality of stay-at-home dads and does not suggest that the wife should be the partner who gives up a career in order to stay home with the children).

An attractive feature of this book is its emphasis on crafting a healthy, balanced, personal approach to one's finances. "What good is a healthy budget if your soul is sick or if you feel distant from God?" (320). This book could be used in pre-marital counseling and is a useful resource for those seeking to practice good stewardship as they contemplate the "nuts and bolts" of their budget.

Joseph N. Ballan
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Money Matters for Teens. By Larry Burkett with Marnie Wooding. Chicago: Moody Press, 2000. 158 pages. $9.99.

Larry Burkett is a Christian business and personal finance consultant. He is also the founder and president of Christian Financial Concepts, which later merged to become Crown Financial Ministries. He has authored over seventy books and was host of several radio programs, approaching matters of personal finance from a biblical point of view.

Burkett and his co-contributor Marnie Wooding base this stewardship work on the biblical premise that it is God who owns everything and asks us to be stewards (managers) whose actions reflect God. They remind readers that in stewardship, relationships are fundamental and must come first—relationship with God, others, ourselves, time, talents, and possessions. Fundamental to these relationships are honesty, integrity, and character (54).

From this foundation, Burkett covers a myriad of topics from savings to taxes, from debit cards to electronic banking, from mutual funds to the gold standards, from credit cards to loans. He also covers each topic with breadth. For example, in the section on loans, Burkett covers personal loans, mortgage loans, educational loans, collateral, co-signing loans, and payback schedules. The main categories of the book are Stewardship, Money, Attitude, Planning, Banking, Spending, and Career.

This is an excellent first resource on stewardship. It presents material clearly and concisely. It contains a number of great stewardship cartoons. The author also uses examples from movies and other aspects of current youth culture. As the back cover contends and the book explicates, "If you don't have plans for how to spend your money, plenty of others are willing to spend it for you. Advertisers. Friends. Credit card companies. Rela-

tives. Fast food restaurants. Clothing stores. If you don't want others to keep spending all of your money for you, it's time to read this book." This book would be a great source of basic information for a high-school-age discussion and may be useful as well as a foundational resource for adults who may be too embarrassed to admit their lack of knowledge on the topics covered or parents seeking to aid their teenagers to reflect on money matters and respond to money questions.

Connie M. Kleingartner

Holy $moke! Whatever Happened to Tithing? By J. Clif Christopher, and Herb Mather. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1999; reprint 2002. 112 pages. $9.99.

J. Clif Christopher is a church growth consultant and an elder in the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church. Herb Mather, also a Methodist elder, is former director of stewardship for the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church in Nashville.

The authors begin with a brief overview of several studies of tithing. They note trends of decreased giving throughout Christian congregations. According to the authors, under five percent of Christians tithe and, in the late 1990s, Christians gave an average of two percent of their incomes. They continue with brief surveys of tithing in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the early church. They discuss three models of giving: haphazard giving, tithing, and stewardship giving, in which everything not needed for necessities is invested in Christian ministry.

The authors call for the tradition of tithing to be renewed. Arguing the necessity of benchmarks, they advocate giving ten percent of net income to the church. Additional giving may go to other agencies or causes. The authors approve of donating time to the church, but not as a substitution for tithing. The percentages tithed may increase over time.

Christopher and Mather provide a practical guide for recruiting a core group in a congregation to tithe. It involves an initial thirty-day commitment of meeting, reading Scripture, and discussing stewardship. This is followed by a ten-week period during which group members continue considering their finances and draw up goals for which group members will hold them accountable. This phase is followed up by three monthly meetings that continue the process. Christopher and Mather conclude their book with how to encourage planned giving and with practical advice and cautions regarding capital campaigns. They view the latter as drawing not on annual income, as tithing does, but on accumulated income and estates. They encourage it so that the congregation can avoid excessive debt.

Money is in service to mission. "The truth is, it is more important for the church to have a mission than for it to have money. Money without a God-given mission is destructive. Nevertheless, mission without money is impossible" (42).

This book offers a guide for Scripture reading and discussion of tithing. Pastors and stewardship leaders may find in this text a useful process for inviting core groups in congregations to explore holy giving.

Linda R. Wimmer

Your Money Matters. By Malcolm MacGregor, and Stanley G. Baldwin. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, rev. 1987. 176 pages. $10.00.

Malcolm MacGregor is a C.P.A. who leads the "Your Money Matters" speaking and consulting agency based in Gresham, Oregon. Stanley Baldwin is a Bible teacher and has been a contributor to *Christianity Today* and *Moody Monthly*.

This book opens with a discussion of the seven major money mistakes that are common in U.S. culture: debt, irresponsibility, wrong values, speculation, selfishness, cheating, and a job-oriented life. The authors move on to a discussion of the basis of a financial freedom from these errors. They state that after we "recognize God's ownership of everything, including us and our lives" we can "establish a clear spiritual purpose" (29-34; 37-41). They go on to make a forceful case for tithing, insisting that "if God is not

getting the tithe, Satan is" (56).

The core of this book is Part III, "Learning Practical Money Management." One chapter discusses how to know when an item is a good buy. It encourages readers to make a distinction between needs and wants, and where they might seek substitutes. Another chapter gives 12 rules for eating well, plus a monthly outline of a group buying/study project. The next two chapters are on credit card debt and how to devise and maintain a realistic family budget.

Part IV, "Strengthening the Family Through Right Use of Money," covers the husband's responsibility for finances, an argument against a wife's work outside the home, how to raise fiscally responsible children, and the necessity of a will.

While the book raises a host of important questions and issues for couples contemplating a committed life together and how they will steward their resources, the book's conservative theological views on male-female relationships and its lack of inclusive language will lead to spirited discussions among couples and groups where theological convictions on these matters differ strongly. The leader of a discussion of this book may need to help couples and groups who use this book navigate these differences as they engage the practical advice on "money matters."

Connie M. Kleingartner

The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith. By Christopher J.H. Wright. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. 224 pages. Cloth, $19.99.

The "Tough Questions" that Christopher Wright's book addresses are as old as the hills. But his clear, honest approach and dialogue with these imponderables of the faith is skillfully fresh, accessible, and relevant to both scholar and non-scholar. Freeing himself of evangelical platitudes and simple solutions, Wright portrays tough questions as they should be portrayed: "really tough." But what is so refreshing about the book is already expressed in the title and subtitle: *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. He doesn't promise all the answers from the get-go. He promises reflections, which he delivers thoughtfully, articulately, prayerfully, and pastorally.

In his introduction, Wright begins by clarifying that there are different types of "not understanding." Often, we simply put "understanding" in the theoretical world, but we experience non-understanding in a variety of ways including grief, emotional pain, puzzlement, and even gratitude. This is a simple yet profound insight with which to begin his book.

Wright acknowledges the agony of evil's influence in the world. For us, it simply does not make sense. Rather than postulating a rationally sound theodicy, however, he turns the tables. For Wright, it is actually a *good* thing that evil does not make sense to us because "sense" is a good part of our rationality that is part of the image of God in us. Evil has nothing to do with "sense"—that is, it is completely beyond our rational notions!

But Wright never leaves the reader in hopelessness. He guards the ugliness of evil's offense and violation of all we know to be good, while equally affirming the goodness of God and the hope of complete redemption.

I have only a few incidental criticisms. Wright frequently quotes Scripture and often includes significant portions of text. This is distracting at times from the flow of the book. (Of course, quoting Scripture too often is a sin easily forgiven!) Some may also object to his perhaps too-hastily expressed eschatological positions (e.g., see p. 169, pp. 199ff.), or generalizations with respect to postmodernity (see pp. 136-38). But these are minor grievances compared to the richness this book offers.

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On the Scope and Truth of Theology: Theology as Symbolic Engagement. By Robert Cummings Neville. New York: T & T Clark, 2006. 240 pages. $29.95.

This book is the first installment of an ambitious four volume systematic theology done by distinguished Methodist theologian

Robert Neville. Neville is well-known for his work in philosophical theology, critiques of process theology and philosophy, and intra-religious studies (especially between Christianity and Chinese religions, such as Confucianism). Here he offers the parameters for systematic theology, particularly as it should be grounded in the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce, who maintained that all thought is fallible. Neville's is a bold correlationalist approach to theology that asserts that the publics to which theology is accountable—the academy, society, and the church—must be expanded, must be expanded so as to include a global awareness (26). He clearly demarcates his theological effort from that of fellow Methodist Stanley Hauerwas, whose work, in Neville's eyes, is too confessionalist and parochial to really address or appropriate contemporary challenges to theology.

In contrast to a wider Christian tradition that acknowledges truth as tied to an authority, such as scripture alone or scripture and the ecclesial tradition, Neville chides any notion of an infallible beginning point for theology. As offering hypotheses—even apart from an eschatological verification as Pannenberg would contend—theology must accept its need for self-correction.

Similar to Tillich, anything theological must somehow be tied to ultimate matters (1). Neville's theology, highlighting "symbolic engagement," recognizes that a sound theology will be configured by imagination, critical assertions, dialectical systematic theorizing, and the employment of practical reasoning.

Recognizing that the theologian as such is situated in a certain time, place, gender, and ethnicity, and that these influences can either help or hinder the systematician, Neville describes himself as "a Methodist, Protestant, American Christian who left Missouri for Boston and who is a self-identified Confucian" (26).

Influenced by Peirce's theory of signs, Neville sees interpretation, which is at the core of theological inquiry, as taking signs to stand for objects. This view likewise has ramifications for interpretation theory, both for theologians and non-theologians. An interpretive act engages the object of its inquiry by means of signs (31). The goal in theological semiotics is finally to push beyond signs and engage ultimate matters (34). A robust theology requires metaphysical speculation, since it is seeking to describe reality as such (45-6). It acknowledges that the symbol-systems it uses, however, not only describe but also shape practices (47). Theological imagination happens as elements of reality are synthesized into the process of experience itself (57).

As an enterprise, Neville's approach seeks to be humble and self-correcting. Theology is inherently dialectical (127-155) and thus is open to constant revision.

One could not review a more different treatment of theology from Hauerwas' than that of Neville. In part, the differences reflect the old debate of the 1980s between the Chicago School, which under David Tracy was clearly correlationalist in approach, and the Yale School under Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

As is typical of correlationalist theology, the philosophical and linguistic jargon (here in this book of semiotics) is fairly thick. Such work seeks to be relevant, but it is exactly the quest for relevance that makes books such as these to become dated.

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***Reformation Christianity: A People's History of Christianity, Volume* 5.** Edited by Peter Matheson. General Editor Denis R. Jans. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. xviii + 306 pages. Hardcover. $35.00.

Within Protestant circles, much is known and discussed regarding the Reformation, with Martin Luther and John Calvin standing out in most accounts of the period. In *Reformation Christianity*, different scholars present essays that describe this era from the perspective of the broader population. In the series *A People's History of Christianity*, authors write about church history from the viewpoint of the laity of a given period. Volume five presents the Reformation.

The text is divided into three sections and eleven chapters, following the introduction by the editor, Peter Matheson. Part one

is entitled "The Life of Faith" and includes three essays, "The Piety of Townspeople and City Folk," "Rural and Village Piety," and "A People's Reformation?" Part two is entitled "From Cradle to Grave" and includes four essays. The descriptor for this section is truly represented in the titles of these essays, "Entering the World," "Baptism and Childhood," "Women and Men, Together and Apart," and "Leaving the World." The final section, part three, is entitled "Finding Their Voice" and includes four essays, "The Dream of a Just Society," "The Emergence of Lay Theologies," "Insiders and Outsiders," and "The Language of Common Folk." These eleven essays give another perspective of the Reformation beyond the overarching theologies of the noted reformers.

The details of Christian life are revealed in this text through various aspects of the average person's existence. It should also be noted that the Reformation was not only a period of Protestant reformers breaking from Rome, but also a time of reformation for the Roman Catholic Church. This text does focus on the Protestant aspects of the Reformation, but mention is made of the Catholic side of things, which could definitely be expanded. Various points of interest will differ from reader to reader, but the text as a whole offers enough diversity as to give readers a peek at belief systems and families in ways that other texts do not. A brief review like this cannot do justice to the plethora of topics located in the volume, but from birth to death, this volume engages topics that affected daily life, especially in part two. Also notable is the beautiful two-page print of Werner Tübke's depiction of the Peasants' War contained in the center of this book (Plate E).

As with other books in this series, the text is laid out efficiently and is quite readable. Pictures and quotations are smattered throughout the book, increasing the ascetic and practical dimensions of the volume. Because the Reformation is central to Protestant theological formation, this text helps to give a fuller picture of the cultural milieu from which this theology developed. This book is accessible for use by academics, pastors, and educated laypeople. The series A People's History of Christianity is a triumph in providing a richer account of church history. Reformation Christianity is no exception.

George Tsakiridis
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Briefly Noted

In ***The Last Divine Office: Henry VIII and the Dissolution of the Monasteries*** Geoffrey Moorhouse details Henry VIII's ruthless dismantling of the British monasteries in the sixteenth century by describing the last days of the Benedictine Priory in Durham, England. Henry enriched his treasury by the dissolution; he also caused immense social upheaval, the disruption of many lives, and fundamentally changed religious life in England. Moorhouse is a skillful writer who tells a good story. This is a fascinating book.

Edgar Krentz
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The Popes of Avignon: A Century in Exile by Edwin Mullins (BlueBridge, $24.95) tells the story of the 70 years the papacy was located in southern France. Popularly written, interestingly told, a fascinating read.

Edgar Krentz

Rodney J. Decker's ***Koine Greek Reader*** (Kregel, $25.99) will be a boon to pastors or students who seek to revive or strengthen their Greek skills. Twenty-three readings (nine from the New Testament, six from the Septuagint, four from the Apostolic Fathers, and four from early creeds) lead the reader through a review of morphology, grammar and vocabulary, and verse by verse analysis. Questions follow each verse that draw out details offering potential for preaching and teaching. Among the appendices is an excellent overview of how to use the BDAG lexicon to its full potential.

Peter Perry
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Preaching Helps

First Sunday of Advent–Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Advent Waiting

Andrea L. Walker, Jennifer Moland-Kovash, Paul Lutter, Carey Gardiner Mack

I recently reviewed the manuscripts of some of my Advent sermons and the experience left me feeling a bit silly. I discovered that, for more than a quarter century, my Advent preaching reveals an underlying theme, sometimes explicit and sometimes subtle, of *convincing* people to wait. For example, I once said, after proclaiming the gospel, of course, that our job is to keep watching, to be ready and waiting for God to come to us in Christ and to put an end to the old and begin something new. To drive the point home in the congregations I served, we waited until after the Fourth Sunday of Advent to put up the tree in the sanctuary (I still make faces when a Christmas tree goes up in the lobby of the seminary in mid-December) and until Christmas Eve to sing carols. In some sermons, I came across as a parent lovingly insisting that the children wait until Christmas morning to open their presents; more often, the congregations I served responded as if I were Ebenezer Scrooge. Every Advent, someone reminded me that the church has been waiting for two thousand years for Jesus to come suddenly and he hasn't arrived yet. Most often in worship, we pretended or feigned waiting and it was not very convincing.

So, feeling silly that I cannot convince people to wait, I find myself wondering how my Advent preaching would sound if I consciously preach to people who don't need convincing. What would my Advent preaching be like if I preach to those who are really, truly, earnestly, and genuinely waiting for God? Who are these people? Perhaps they are still sitting in the ash of last Lent, because their awareness of their sin is so great that, when the church celebrated Christ rising on Easter, they somehow got left behind in the tomb. Jennifer Moland-Kovash, who offers reflections for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, reminds us that "Mary's pregnancy is not a long-awaited grandchild for her parents; the cries for God's action are born out of an experience of God's perceived absence or even punishment." Perhaps those waiting for God include people convinced that God has abandoned them and are waiting for God to come back. Maybe they are people whose experience of God is penalizing, unforgiving, even vindictive, and they are waiting for the mercy and grace they hear so much about. Jenn continues, "Those who grieve—whether they sit in the pew, stand behind the pulpit or hover just outside the doors—might resonate with the very present sense of longing in these readings." In addition to those grappling with sin and grief, I am mindful of people who understand themselves as gifted by the Spirit, called to participate in the priesthood of all believers, but are unable to find employment, and so have given up hope of exercising any sense of vocation. We all know people waiting for God to grant them justice, forgiveness, wholeness, and peace.

How do we preach Advent to these people? I do not imagine that preaching to those who genuinely wait for God will change the core message of Advent preaching. I won't, for example, offer a sermon series on getting through the holidays after a loved one has died. This is important pastoral care that, in my opinion, works best in a venue other than the pulpit. Besides, I think we need to be reminded that we know the end of the story, the world's as well as our own. "Christ will," as we pray at the table, "come again in beauty and power to share with us the great and promised feast." Rather than changing sermon content, I want to include people who are truly waiting for God as my conversation partners in sermon preparation to give the content urgency, immediacy, authenticity, and realism. To do this, I could imagine devoting my November newsletter article (a task I am so very glad usually is handled by my pastoral colleague) to inviting those who are genuinely waiting for God to invite me to coffee and tell me their story. I'd open the readings and I would ask them what they think, what questions they have, what feelings get evoked, what they need to hear. I suspect that these conversations would infuse my sermons—and through them the congregation—with an authentic Advent spirit, which I previously thought I had to cultivate by convincing.

Thanks to Facebook, these preaching helps are like the ensemble cast of a Christmas pageant. On very short notice, this collection of angels—messengers of good news—scrambled and provided very helpful insights for preaching. **Andrea L. Walker** (Advent 1 and 2) is pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church, Summit, New Jersey, and a graduate of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program. **Jennifer Moland-Kovash** (Advent 3 and 4) is pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church, Palatine, Illinois. **Paul Lutter** (Christmas through the Baptism of Our Lord) is an ELCA pastor working on his Ph.D. in systematic theology at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and an adjunct instructor in the Religion Department at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. **Carey Gardiner Mack** (Epiphany 3 and 4), an ordained minister in the ELCA, currently serves as the Youth Minister at First Baptist Church in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan. I thank them all for their quick response and fine work.

I pray that we who earnestly and genuinely wait for God will experience Christ's coming in and through the church's preaching this Advent. God grant that our sermons will be experiences of forgiveness, comfort, hope, purpose, justice, and peace. "Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come."

Craig A. Satterlee
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First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2009

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

First Reading

In the thirty-third chapter of Jeremiah God speaks to Jeremiah while he is imprisoned (v. 1). These words are a promise to return Judah and Jerusalem to their former state. Now, these cities stand as a wasteland, isolated and forsaken, destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. God tells Jeremiah "the days are surely coming" (v. 14). God promises a new ruler and, to signify the coming of the day when God's promise will be fulfilled, God changes the name of Jerusalem to "the Lord is our righteousness (*sedeq*)." The name of the city harkens back to Jeremiah 23:6 where the coming ruler's name is also "the Lord is our righteousness." This new name has everything to do with how God will put the city in "right order" by means of a ruler who will act with "integrity." Both concepts of "right order" and "integrity" are ways to interpret *sedeq*.

From these promises we understand that someone who is governed by God shall govern this place. In these words we hear God's promise to the people that things will be different. For the people of Israel, something long awaited and hoped for will happen. God has come bringing assurances that with the change of their name, their status will change. Under the hands of an unjust ruler they have lived in a state of destruction, persecution, and havoc. They have been in captivity, and now they will see the deliverance and care of God. This change, this new status, is about how the people will live in right order with God and integrity with each other. It is evidence that as God changes names, so God is able to change the status, condition, and future of the people.

The theme of change continues in the other readings for the day. In 1 Thessalonians Paul prays that the church in Thessalonica might experience change. He prays that, though they may feel persecuted, they might remain in faith and abound in love (3:12). Paul prays that their hearts might be strengthened and they might be blameless before God (3:13). In the text from Luke the people are warned to be alert for change. That change is manifested in the sun, moon, stars, and in trees, clouds, and those who cower. This coming of the Lord should precipitate also a change in us. Instead of cowering, those who trust in God "stand up, raise their heads and look up" (21:28).

Pastoral Reflection

When I first read the end of the sixteenth verse of this thirty-third chapter of Jeremiah, "And this is the name by which it will be called: 'the Lord is our righteousness,'" my first thought was the famous quote from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, would smell as sweet." This biblical change of name is the opposite of what the words from the play imply. These words from *Romeo and Juliet* imply that for these young people in love, the name by which they are called does not amount to much. It is Juliet saying to Romeo, it does not matter what we call you, you are still wonderful and my beloved. In the eyes of teenaged lovers names are no big deal, but names mean much. It is in fact their names that cause much trouble and consternation for the young lovers. If only he were not a Montague and she were not a Capulet,

then they might have been free to fall in love, even free to have a life together. But names—what a thing is called—in the play, and especially in the biblical text, have tremendous significance.

We read again and again in scripture of names being changed. In biblical texts, name changes have significance. Jacob's name, which means "supplanter," is changed to Israel, and he becomes the father of a nation. Jacob changes the name of the place where he has striven with God to Peniel (Gen 32:30). This signals something has happened, something unique; something of note has transpired in that place. When Abram's name changes to Abraham, and Sari's changes to Sarah, it is an indication that something in their lives has changed. Even in the New Testament, when Saul has an encounter with the risen Christ, his name is changed to Paul and a whole new world, new life and new identity are opened to him.

In many cultures, when people pledge their lives in union to one another, one or the other of the members of the couple changes their name. In U.S. culture it is the woman who traditionally takes on the man's name. Traditions change and many modern couples are now hyphenating their names. Whether traditional or modern, a name change signifies that they are no longer single, but are now in a committed life-long relationship with one another. Indeed, something of note has transpired.

The coming of the "Son of Man" changes things. Whether it is Jesus' birth in a manger or his apocalyptic coming at the end times, when God enters our lives nothing remains the same. The world is changed; we are changed. As we move into another church year, now might be a good time to recall how our names are changed in the waters of baptism. We come being called by the name our parents gave us, but we leave the font being called children of God. ALW

Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2009

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:68-79
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

First Reading

In our Old Testament reading we are not sure that the title of the book we are reading is the name of an actual person or just a title. The word *malachi* in Hebrew means, "my messenger." In Christian tradition these writings are the final book of the Old Testament and seem to function to prepare us for what is to come. The writer prepares us by telling us of the messenger God is sending (3:1a). He then asks questions about the one of whom the messenger speaks, "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" (3:2). When we read this text in Advent we understand that we are being pointed toward John, the messenger who prepares, who then points us to the "messenger of the covenant" (3:1b), who must surely be Jesus.

Our gospel reading begins with an orderly list of rulers and religious leaders. It is through them that the time and place are set. This indicates their importance and power. After they are listed, there is John. John's status when we meet him is that of wilderness or desert dweller (Luke 3:1). His identity is formed in the place that is similar to where Israel wandered for so long and where Moses received the covenant. The wilderness is also where Jesus will be tempted by the devil for forty days (Luke 4:1). Often thought of

as a place of desolation, our image of the wilderness is an area void of water and battered by the sun. It is thought of as a place of trial and challenges and it is. In addition, it is where God cares for the Israelites and shows God's strength and power. It is also where John receives a word from God (3:2).

We hear of John, previous to our text, as the babe that leaps in Elizabeth's womb (1:41). After his birth we hear the song that his father, Zechariah, sings about his role in preparing the way for the "mighty savior" (Luke 1:67-79). Yet, between his birth and his appearance in our reading there is no mention of John. The scripture does not tell us when he enters, or how long John is in the wilderness. It is only conjecture, but perhaps John is sent into the wilderness away from his parents, away from civilization to be tested and to endure a trial that teaches him to depend solely on God.

We know John will speak out against wrong and be imprisoned (Luke 3:19-20), then beheaded by Herod (Mark 6:28). We know the one whom he heralds compares him with prophets of old and praises him (Matt 11:11-13). What we do not know is how this unlikely messenger moves to the edge of the wilderness, just beyond positions of power and orderliness, to call the people back to God, cajoling them into a baptism of repentance (*metonia*) for the forgiveness of sin. We can conjecture that it is God who empowers John the Baptist to be able to cry out, to all within the range of his voice, to be washed in water, and see the coming salvation of God (3:6).

Paul, another unlikely messenger, thanks and congratulates the followers of Christ in Philippi for believing and "proclaiming God's message." He prays that they continue to grow in a fuller condition of love and that this condition might influence how they live their lives. Paul calls us all to live so that Jesus would be proud.[1]

Pastoral Reflection

"I'm starting with the man in the mirror, I'm asking him to change his ways."[2] Yes, I know I am quoting a Michael Jackson song, and even as I write I know you the reader may groan. With all the previous media attention around Michael Jackson's death in June of this year, these are the words that come to mind as I think about John's cry of repentance (*metonia*). *Metonia* word-translated repentance from the Greek can be interpreted as "a change of mind." It implies a sense of regret or remorse. The very potent lyrics of Jackson's song, "I see the kids in the street, with not enough to eat. Who am I to be blind? Pretending not to see their need" implies the regret of not seeing what is right in front of him. The song, composed by Seidah Garrett, is calling us to stop and change our minds.

John the Baptist's call is similar. He steps out of the wilderness in a clear strong voice calling us to stop ignoring God. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John cries. Later he will tell those gathered how. (Luke 3:11) But how do we? As we move closer and closer to the most commercialized day of the year, in a time of recent economic crisis, how do we "make his paths straight"? Could the economic crisis, which might be thought of as a wilderness experience, help us depend solely on God? This Advent can we change our minds about money, power, status, and our sense of orderliness? I believe we can.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, (Navpress: 2004) Philippians 3:3-11.

2. Michael Jackson, "Man in the Mirror, *Bad,* 1987, Sony Music

We are empowered by God through the waters of our baptism; we are promised the forgiveness of sins; we can change our minds. Yes, I know Michael Jackson is an unlikely messenger of repentance but as he sings, he calls us to "Take a look at ourselves and make that change." ALW

Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2009

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

We don't read Zephaniah very often in worship. In fact, it's only designated twice besides this day: Easter Vigil and Proper 28A/Ordinary 33A. The book moves from anger to the song of joy that we read for today, and this movement fits well thematically with Advent. The sense of motion that comes from preparing (hearts, minds, worship spaces, nurseries, living rooms?) often transitions us from anger or ambivalence to joy or acceptance. Halfway through the Sundays of Advent we're still getting ready, but sense that we're much closer to the end than the beginning. Zephaniah's song of joy also provides a forward-looking joyfulness in contrast to the realized joy of Mary's song that our congregations will hear as part of the Advent 4 readings.

All of the first readings (including the psalm) follow a model of joy and promise; they provide us with words of trust and rejoicing, of peace and fulfillment. After hearing these texts, the opening of Luke's account of John the Baptist can be a bit startling: "You brood of vipers!" (Luke 3:7) How will you inflect that statement from the pulpit? If you walked into a family gathered for the baptism, decked out in their finery and cooing over the baby, and pronounced them to be a brood of vipers, how would they respond? Perhaps it goes without saying that we've domesticated baptism, not to mention John the Baptist.

Rather than the people running away or responding in anger at John's lack of inter-personal skills, they plead with him to tell them what to do. How do we bring about the promises foretold and the Promised One? How do we move from singing quaint songs that lilt about "that day" and "that time" to dancing in the streets about fulfilled prophecies? (Zeph 3:16, 20)

John is right to respond to the people's request for further preparation. It is not enough to simply know the routine and the songs of old. John uproots people to live into the worship of the day. You can't rely on the good name of your ancestors, John says, the good reputation of your family (congregation?) in the community (Luke 3:8). You must continually and actively proclaim your experience of God. I'm not sure that "You brood of vipers" would work as the next evangelism technique, but it certainly garners a response.

John calls the crowds to bear the fruits worthy of repentance, not just to go through the motions. When we begin our worship with confession and forgiveness, do we lay it all out in our hearts? Or do we keep a few of our pet sins behind? Do we offer everything up for God, relying on the good name of our ancestors? In this season of preparation and decorating, do we start at the beginning? Do we clean away the cobwebs and patch the cracks in the walls? Or do we pile neatly-wrapped gifts to hide the dust bunnies and hang garland to cover the cracks in the walls?

John clamors for folks to really clean house for the kingdom before Jesus arrives.

Clean house when it comes to sharing and giving. Clean house when it comes to having relationships and businesses; build those relationships on fairness and honesty. Clean house so that your foundation is solid.

Where then is the good news? The message of hope remains, as spoken by John: one who is more powerful is coming (3:16). The people's hearts were full of expectation, as are ours, and John speaks to the promises that Isaiah and Zephaniah sing about: that day, that time is coming. It's on the way.

So, we continue to wait, and we wonder how to do that. As people who claim the resurrection, we wait again for the birth, singing along with the songs of expectation and hope. We hear John's words, too, as we wonder, "What should we do?" This preparation and waiting feels different than opening a door on the Advent calendar or impatiently waiting for guests to arrive. This waiting reminds us that even though we have received the fulfillment of the promise through our own baptisms, we're not ready yet—there's still, always, work to be done in response. We move in our waiting, then, from idly tapping fingers to sounding the drum for justice. We shift from eating another cookie out of boredom to feeding the hungry. We go beyond mourning bonus checks of years gone by to clamoring for fair wages for all.

And so it seems that as we wait, we get busy. We get busy not with the hurried days of packed schedules and rushed lives, but busy doing God's work. JMM-K

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2009

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 5:5-10
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

We have a choice on this day for our readings. We can choose to sing the Magnificat in the place of the psalm, or we can include that in the gospel reading and use Psalm 80. I've chosen to include the psalm in my reflections as it allows for another voice to express the waiting. In the context of the day being Advent 4, we hear the psalmist's cry of "O Lord God of hosts/ how long…" as an echo to many who wait for release from despair, longing for the hope that is promised. (Psalm 80:4)

"There! It's perfect!" My mother stepped back from the tree and proclaimed it the best one ever. She does this every year, and every year it's truly the best one ever.

By the 20th of December we're ready, aren't we, as preachers, to step back and proclaim everything done, even if not perfect. But while we might be ready, certainly desirous for that to be the case, our reality dawdles behind like a distracted toddler. Fortunately our scriptures give voice more to the reality than to our day-dreams. The psalmist wants to know how much longer, and Micah still speaks to Bethlehem as the place from which the leader shall come. We're still setting things out, hoping they're in the right place, acknowledging as the writer of Hebrews does that our offerings and worship and decorating are not necessarily pleasing to the Lord. So we try again… and again…

Just as the psalmist implores God to

get to work at restoration, Mary's song lifts these prayers to a near-completion: "Surely, from now on…" While these texts might feel at odds with one another, the sense of overlap is all too real in our world. Rarely do we experience the end of one thing—pause—then the beginning of another. Instead the end and the beginning often rise up together, showcasing the presence of God's grace in the mishmash of our lives.

These passages, when read together, lend themselves to a vision of completeness. We sing first to God to "stir up your might, and come to save us" (Psalm 80:2) and then hear Mary sing with trust and faith that "[God] has shown strength with his arm" (Luke 1:51). This completion, after all, is what we pray for through the Advent season, and what we await with eager anticipation. And, while the Fourth Sunday of Advent isn't Christmas, it feels close—our preparations are very near to being complete.

But what happens when we've preached for three weeks already on the preparations and the getting ready? Sadly, a repetitive message does not a good theme make. While it's possible that children's pageants and congregational cantatas have interrupted a smooth preaching schedule, these texts also provide other directions for preaching and reflecting.

In addition to Mary's song, we also have Elizabeth's proclamation of Jesus' identity. "And why has this happened," she asks, "that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (Luke 1:43) In Elizabeth's own time of pregnant expectation we hear her confess that Jesus is Lord—and a personal claim that he is her Lord. Obviously we suspend some of our adherence to time when we read about a grown John the week before we hear about him leaping in the womb, but the excitement is no less real. This recognition, along with those of Simeon and Anna, declare Jesus to be the fulfillment of prophecy. When have you confessed Jesus as Lord? How has the fulfillment of the prophecy felt real, or not, in your own life?

The psalmist implores God to "Stir up your might" (Ps 80:2). We use this invitation in our collects, perhaps with little thought as to the congregational implications. What happens when God's might gets stirred up? On whose behalf are we praying? The psalmist goes on "and come to save us!" Is there a reluctance to acknowledge that we need saving? Without talking about salvation, do we want to admit that we could use God's might more than our own? If so, where would we like God's might to appear—in our lives, in our churches, in our world, our neighborhood? Where do we want to see God's restoration and shining face? (80:3, 7)

As we teeter on the brink of Christmas, we're also able to acknowledge the proximity of this day to the longest night of the year, and the pervasive sadness that accompanies this time of year for many people. Mary's pregnancy is not a long-awaited grandchild for her parents; the cries for God's action are born out of an experience of God's perceived absence or even punishment. Those who grieve—whether they sit in the pew, stand behind the pulpit or hover just outside the doors—might resonate with the very present sense of longing in these readings.

This Sunday, the last time your congregation might gather formally before celebrating the newborn baby Jesus, provides an opportunity to look around one more time before declaring the birth. While we joke about my mother's yearly proclamation of the perfect tree, her statement is not one of being done, but instead of being ready—ready to rejoice, ready to welcome, ready to burst into song. JMM-K

The Nativity of Our Lord
December 24, 2009

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Gathered together for worship on this night will be people who are there because they want to celebrate the birth of the Christ, but they will not be alone. There will be people who have given up altogether on organized religion as well but who are there nonetheless out of familial obligation, in addition to those who are lonely, those who are hungry, those who are poor, those who are hurting and angry, those who are abused and abusing, and those who are grieving; there will be those, also, who are excited about the future: the young, the newly engaged or married, those expecting or having just given birth to a child. The daunting task for the preacher is to proclaim this story in such a way that it is *good news* for *all* those who are gathered, whatever the reason that they have entered the sanctuary. Some preachers will want to exhort those in attendance to go, like the shepherds, and tell the good news to those who haven't heard; others will want to tell stories tangentially related to Luke's narrative of Jesus' birth that get across the powerful message of the gospel; still others will want to embark on a lesson in metaphysics, explaining how it is that Jesus is both God *and* man. While all of these are understandable, and there is room in the life of the church for each of these, the preacher would do well to steer clear of these things for tonight, and simply proclaim the good news found in Luke's narrative.

From where should the preacher begin, and what shall the preacher say? Given the current realities in the world in which we live, perhaps the best place to begin is at the very center of the text: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for *all* the people: *to you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:10b-11)[3] Writes Martin Luther regarding these words,

> The gospel does not merely teach the story and accounts of Christ, but personalizes them and gives them to all who believe in it, which is also… the right and real nature of the gospel. What good would it do me, if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be my own? [4]

While Luther's context is not necessarily the same as our own, what is similar is the strong sense of fear that pervades throughout society, for one reason or another. In the midst of such fear, the only thing that can break through, bringing comfort, security, and hope, is the proclamation of the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection *for us*. Tell the story—the *whole* story—and by so doing, proclaim that Jesus is the One who is God *with us*, and who promises, by being for us and with us, to make all things new for us, even in the midst of whatever fear we carry.

Some may wonder if telling the whole story, from birth through resurrection, is really necessary; after all, there *are* other days of the church year in which to tell these other parts of the story. It is in this

3. Emphases mine.
4. *LW* 52.20-21.

sentiment that the preacher's own fear is revealed: What if the gospel doesn't really do what it says? What if it can't bring comfort, security, and hope to those who are afraid? Or worse: what if it does? What if telling the whole story with its particularity (Jesus for us, with us; Jesus for you, with you; right here, right now) really does make all things new, even under the sign of the opposite?

Whatever the fears of those gathered, including those of the preacher, the good news is this: Jesus came all the way down, born as a child to a virgin in a stable, and was placed in a manger. He entered into the life of the world, even into the lives of those whom the rest of the world threw aside, so that he could do a new thing: forgive, heal, and teach, so that the world as it was known would be turned upside down. He died and was raised from death for the sake of the world. And this One—God *with* us—promises to be *your* Lord: He enters into your life, through water and the Word, walks with you through darkest valley and back again, taking upon himself what is yours—sin, brokenness, fear, and death—and gives you what only he can give—forgiveness, healing, hope, comfort, peace, and salvation. This One, will come again, for you. "He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally."[5] Tell the *whole* story *to* us, and *for* us. In it, there is comfort, security, and hope, even here and even now. For, in and through it, God is *with* us. PL

5. Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, trans and ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 355.

First Sunday after Christmas
December 27, 2009

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

If the gospel readings in the season of Advent call us to wait and watch for the coming of the promised Messiah, the gospel readings in the season of Christmas call us to complete and utter celebration. This is certainly the case with the gospel assigned for the First Sunday after Christmas. In other words, there is good news here, telling us that it's time to party, for the One for whom we have waited and watched is here; there's nothing left to do but celebrate!

At first reading, however, Luke 2:41-52 does not look like a cause for celebrating. It certainly is an important text, giving us a unique and rare glimpse into Jesus' childhood. But this does not necessarily give credence to the claim of celebration; indeed, some childhoods are anything but celebratory! Certainly, one can empathize with Joseph and Mary at the fact that their child was missing; this isn't cause for celebration, for sure. It is also the case that this encounter between those in the Temple and the boy Jesus happens in the wider context of the Passover, which certainly is cause for celebration for the people of Israel, and foreshadows, in a sense, the Passover that would take place in which Jesus would celebrate the Last Supper later on in Luke's Gospel.

One may wish to raise the point that Jesus never asked permission of his parents to stay behind in the Temple to teach; or, perhaps one may want to call family services on Mary and Joseph for losing track of their son. Jesus, however,

does not ask permission to do what he is called to do, or go where he is called to go; he just does it, showing up in the craziest places, doing the craziest things, for the craziest people, including us.

The late New Testament scholar Donald H. Juel, known especially for his work with the Gospel of Mark, once suggested that in the story of Jesus' baptism in Mark's Gospel, God was "on the loose" in such a way that no one would ever be able to contain him.[6] This is not only a theme in Mark's Gospel, however; in this reading from Luke, we see a God who shows up in Jesus Christ who is *with us*. The celebration in this reading comes when one realizes that Jesus, *God with us*, does not restrain himself, but rather comes into the Temple to teach. Now, it could readily be said that for some students, learning is not always cause for celebration, either. Yet, Jesus meets people where they are at, and speaks to those who are hungering and thirsting. Not even his earthly parents can restrain Jesus from meeting people where they are at. Not even the political or religious authorities could restrain him. Not even a cross and a tomb covered by a large rock could restrain or contain Jesus from meeting people where they are at, and making all things new for them.

People who gather for worship on this Sunday may or may not feel much like celebrating, either. Let's face it: the good news of God with us can sometimes sound hollow in the face of the other realities out of which we live. The preacher, then, has the opportunity of proclaiming how this One who is God with us is not at all restrained, but enters into the stark realities of our lives. As Jesus does not ask for permission, but just goes about the business of giving people what they need in the gospel text for today, so, too, Jesus does the same for us and with us.

How, then, to go about this kind of proclamation that speaks with particularity into the other realities which we face is the question *de jour*. This is not a reading in which Jesus is example, or out of which we are called to exhort people to do this or that, so the reading is not given to a proclamation in which we attempt to tell people how to live like Jesus. The tone of this reading is one of Jesus who is a surprising, overwhelming, exasperating *gift*. And this, perhaps, is where the gospel reading will confront many who sit in the pews; for that matter, this may be where the reading confronts the preacher as well. It's much easier to tell people what *they* need to do, rather than what God is doing *for* them and *with* them. Likewise, it is much easier to hear what we must do, rather than what God is doing for us and with us.

Several months ago, while I was teaching a Bible study in a congregation, a parishioner asked a question out of the blue about Holy Communion. "When we say that Jesus is present and active in Holy Communion, we mean that symbolically, right?" We spent the next hour hammering out what real presence means. The man who asked this question finally said, "If Jesus is actually present and active in Holy Communion, well, that's hard to take."

Hard to take or not, Jesus shows up, giving us what only Jesus can give: forgiveness, healing, and salvation. PL

6. Juel makes this point at several points in his scholarly work. See, for example, Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

Second Sunday after Christmas
January 3, 2010

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 147:12-20
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:(1-9), 10-18

This Sunday will be the third day into a new year. Thoughts of *newness*, in one way or another, will be on the minds of many. With this in mind, and the readings in front of us for this day, perhaps it's a propitious moment to help those among whom you preach to talk about what's new, i.e., Jesus Christ, "Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), in contradistinction from other notions of newness that pervade in both culture and church alike. This might prove challenging, as the word "new" isn't necessarily in any of the readings for this day; however, the concept is there in full measure, and deserves a hearing among those who need to hear what's new.[7]

Jeremiah 31:7-14 is part of a larger section (Jer 31:1-14) in which the prophet announces a new thing regarding the kingdoms of Israel: they will be reunited. Thus, this passage is entirely about newness: not only reuniting Israel, but also reuniting the people of Israel with God, who, once again, "…has become a father to Israel…," and "…will gather them…" (Jer 31:9, 10). The final four verses of the pericope from Jeremiah describe what such newness looks like in that society.

Psalm 147:12-20 declares a new posture for the people, namely, praise, where once their backs were bowed down carrying the yoke of slavery. And, in these verses alone, there is much for which to praise God: "…he strengthens the bars of your gates…" (13); "He grants peace…he fills you with the finest of wheat…" (14); "He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly" (15). At the end of this psalm, the writer gives the ultimate reason for praise: God has been faithful to Israel, and to no other (20).

Ephesians 1:3-14 proclaims a new ground on which we stand, a new inheritance which we have been given, and a new identity out of which we live. In Ephesians 1:7, the writer declares, concerning the new ground on which we stand, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace…." In Ephesians 1:11, the author announces, concerning the new inheritance, "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things, according to his counsel and will." And, finally, concerning the new identity, the author writes, "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as *God's own people*…." (Eph 1.13-14)[8]

The gospel for the Second Sunday after Christmas takes up the second half of the prologue to John's Gospel. While many will want to run for the hills at the sight of this text, either having preached on it on Christmas Day, or having not preached on it for a number of different reasons, this passage deserves its due. For, you see, this text is nothing but promise. In this reference, we hear "…he gave power to become children of God" (1:12b); that

7. For a classic study on the notion of *newness* in the New Testament, see Roy A. Harrisville, *The Concept of Newness in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960).

8. Emphasis mine.

Word becomes flesh (v. 14)[9]; that "[f]rom his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace" (16); "…grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (17b); and "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made [God] known" (18b).

The preacher may be tempted to jump right to the question of where one might find, visibly, this Word made flesh today. Beware of this, however, lest one end up looking for God where God does not wish to be found.[10] As John describes it, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:10-11).

The problem with preaching about newness (new creation, new life, etc.) is that so much of it is hidden. Yet, this is precisely why it might be a good time to talk about it. Newness is often hidden, but it is not absent; herein lays the distinction between how so many people think about newness, even sometimes in the church, and how it actually is. In this reading from John, we see that newness comes hidden, under the sign of the opposite, present precisely where and how people could never, ever have expected or identified it. Yet, it is there; it is here. And newness' name is Jesus Christ. PL

9. For an extremely helpful description of this concept in Luther's work, see Oswald Bayer, "Das Wort ward Fleisch: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation," in *Creator est Creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation*, ed. Oswald Bayer and Benjamin Gleede (New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 5-34.

10. This is an allusion to what it means to be a theologian of glory, as Luther describes it in his "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31.52. An excellent commentary on this point may be found in Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 71ff.

Baptism of our Lord
January 10, 2010

Isaish 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Since Jesus' baptism is a story that is found in each of the Gospels, it is important to pay heed to the distinctiveness of Luke's rendering of it. The pericope positions the preacher to recognize the paradox between John the Baptist, whom the crowd hoped would be the Messiah (Luke 3:16) and Jesus, of whom it is said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (3:22) What is omitted from this pericope is the scene in which John the Baptist is imprisoned by Herod (3:18-20). Already, on this level, Luke may be suggesting a distinction in the way power and authority is understood and used between Herod the king, and Jesus the King. The importance of this distinction should not be lost as one preaches their way through Luke's Gospel.

When he is asked if he is the Messiah in John's Gospel, John points away from himself and toward Jesus: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) No such confession comes from John as Luke tells the story. However, as in John's account, in Luke, John the Baptist makes a clear distinction between who he is and who Jesus is: John is the announcer, yes, but he is not the main event. The one who comes "will baptize you with the Holy

Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16); he will "gather the wheat into his granary…but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (3:17) In this description of the Messiah, Luke is speaking both in a present and an eschatological sense; the description in Luke 3:16 suggests a present-tense; the description in Luke 3:17 a future-tense. Both, however, are rooted in a promise which echoes to us from the past.

The actual baptism of Jesus in Luke's narrative shows that "the heaven was opened" (Luke 3:21) when Jesus has already been baptized and is "praying" (3:21), whereas in Mark's Gospel heaven is rent open when Jesus comes up out of the water. Another distinction in Luke's narrative of Jesus' baptism is the fact that "…the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." (3:22) It is this "bodily" description that is distinct to Luke's telling of the story, and is perhaps supportive of those who would argue for the authorship of Luke-Acts to be one who was a physician.

The words from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" are readily reminiscent of Psalm 2:7, which is part of a coronation psalm. While this psalm may have been used at the coronation of other kings, who themselves were seen as gods, there will emerge throughout Luke's story of Jesus a clear distinction between the kind of god we meet in the rulers in Luke's Gospel and the kind of God to whom we are introduced in Jesus Christ.

Those gathered for worship on this Sunday may have already been baptized; given the way of the world today, however, it is entirely possible that you will have people who are among you who have yet to be baptized. Let us not fool ourselves, however; even those gathered who have been baptized may have no idea what it's about. I recall leading a Bible study in which there were people who have attended worship and been members of that particular congregation for longer than I had been alive (or even have up to this writing). The focus of that day's study was Baptism. Right away, a member piped up, "You know, I just don't get it. We talk about how, when we are baptized, we are joined to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. But, how can water do all of that?"

It's perhaps a common question—whether verbalized or not—and suggests that we have work to do, both in helping people understand baptism, but also in helping people understand something about the kind of God we have. These two things are connected, of course; one's understanding of baptism is indicative of one's understanding of the kind of God we have. In today's sermon, one may wish to take up baptism as one way of talking about the kind of God we have. In so doing, one may wish to focus on the promises of God in Christ through the Spirit in baptism, or perhaps one would do well to take up certain sections of Luther's Small Catechism that deal with baptism. Or, perhaps one focuses simply on the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." PL

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 17, 2010

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 36:5-10
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

First Reading

The reading from John is highly symbolic—a wedding, wine (and not just wine, but excellent wine), water, a bridegroom, a mother, the containers that hold the water then wine, and the "third day." One might think that the writer of the fourth Gospel did this on purpose.

Our most important task, therefore, is to understand why the writer includes the symbols of this passage for revealing Jesus' identity. The Wedding at Cana is not just the story of a miracle. It is also full of *signs (sēneia)*, those images and words that point to something else. Everything in this passage points to or reveals an aspect of Jesus' identity. These signs are meant to inspire belief in Jesus as Son of God.

One symbol of the passage is the setting itself—a wedding. Not just any wedding. This sign happens at a Jewish wedding—an event that might even seem wild to our modern sensibilities—seven days and seven nights of drinking, story telling, feasting, and dancing (picture large whirling circles of people), in which Jesus surely participated. Weddings meant many people—especially a wedding celebration that needed 180 gallons of wine. Perhaps it is not insignificant that Jesus went into a very public gathering to reveal his first sign. In her book *Wisdom's Friends*, Sharon Ringe describes Jesus as an embodiment of Wisdom and writes, "Wisdom's zeal to find those who would accept her, learn from her, and find the life that is God's saving intent for them is poignantly portrayed in her combing the street corners and marketplaces to make her case…Jesus meets, heals, and teaches people outdoors or in overtly public gatherings like the wedding at Cana."[11]

Wine is also a symbol. Jesus orders servants to put water into jars that were used in purity rituals and turns that water into wine, in a way to connect purifying rituals with this miracle. This is also the first miracle that Jesus performs. Why choose wine? Jesus may have chosen wine because it is a festive drink. Perhaps Jesus chose what was simply needed at the time and, therefore, made a practical choice. The act of saving the wedding by making wine is a symbol of hospitality, in making sure that the guests had enough of this festive drink. This points to keeping people included in this feast and celebration.

Finally, a first reading of this text points to the feelings present at this first sign—what was it like for the disciples, newly chosen? How did Mary experience this and why did she immediately point to Jesus, rather than pursue her own solution to this crisis? And make no mistake, running out of wine during one of these festivals would have been a crisis. Was this sign solely for the benefit of the disciples and their belief?

Pastoral Reflection

One challenge for anyone preaching on this gospel reading is our modern age, in which many of these tales are demythologized and domesticated. One will need to find some connection to the initial

11. Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 57.

power that this passage might have had for its original hearers. Frederick Buechner makes a good first step toward this in his essay, "The Wedding at Cana" in *The Hungering Dark*. He retells a section of *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Alexai dreams of this wedding at Cana and describes it as, "a dream of indescribable joy." What does that look like? Buechner then makes the prayerful point that, "ours are our lives themselves, to hoard in misery or to give away in joy…ours is the ear that is deaf, the tongue that is mute, the eye that is blind…ours is the cross that he died upon."[12] and hits the whole of the importance of the signs and symbols that we read in John 2:1-11.

The reference to the Brothers Karamazov is about conversion experience in which Alexai realizes that his life is something that he could hoard in misery or give away in joy. Jesus is revealed in a time of joy. Clearly, Jesus is in the pro-giving-away-in-joy camp. Christ's love is revealed in ordinary things—marriage, wine, water, and dreams. And Jesus' message was and is this—take joy in that love as it is revealed in life's ordinary things.

It is probably a little dangerous to get up in a pulpit or into the congregation and preach about joy. What about those who struggle with depression, for example? There is the risk that someone struggling with depression might hear the encouragement to feel joy as judgment that they are just not trying hard enough. Is it okay to preach about joy in the midst of war, or poverty that spreads daily, or environmental crisis?

Barbara Brown Taylor answers these questions well. She writes that joy is, "different from happiness, or pleasure, or fun…The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it."[13] CGM

12. Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: HarperCollins, 1969), p 95.

13. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," *The Living Pulpit* (Oct-Dec 1996): 16.

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 24, 2010

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

First Reading

Today's gospel reading tells of Jesus' first appearance before his hometown crowd in Nazareth of Galilee. This is also Jesus' first step into public ministry. And the crowd that greets him will quickly change their feelings about Jesus and his calling, for which he prepared through his baptism and time of temptation in the wilderness. Luke makes a point of telling us that Jesus was filled with the Spirit after his baptism and temptation experience, although Luke does not mention whether or not Jesus is filled with the Spirit before his return from the temptation and baptism events.

Jesus begins his public ministry by teaching in synagogues and everyone praises him. This will change when Jesus gets to his hometown. Luke describes Nazareth as the community where Jesus was raised *(tethrammenos)*, which is an ironic word as the Greek can also mean was nourished, or fattened, as well as the way that the New Revised Standard Version translates it, "brought up." The other instances of its use in Luke-Acts refer several times to nourishing and

feeding.[14] This implies that the community of Nazareth cared for and invested in Jesus.

The irony of this word lies in the congregation's reaction to Jesus reading from the Isaiah scroll. At the conclusion of our pericope, "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" (Luke 4:20). However, in verses 28 and 29, Jesus' words provoke rage and lead those in the synagogue to drive "him out of the town, and [lead Jesus] to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff." As far as the Gospel of Luke is concerned, this is Jesus' last visit to Nazareth, the place that nourished him and "brought him up."

Still, in today's pericope, the people of the synagogue hold the capacity to hear the words of Jesus that are an amalgamation of Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6. They listen, comment approvingly about Joseph's son, and fix their eyes on Jesus. Meanwhile, Jesus is beginning to elaborate and redact the scriptures of his time. One shift that happens between Isaiah and Luke occurs as Luke leaves out the element of justice that includes the "day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2). Another shift in language exists between Isaiah 61:1, in which the Lord "has sent me *to bring,*" and Luke 4:18—the Lord has sent Jesus "*to proclaim*." In other words, Jesus is not hoping or asking for God's New Age. Instead, Jesus is ushering in God's New Age. Jesus challenges the people of the synagogue further by sharing the spirit of Isaiah 58:6, which says, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." Jesus connects the spiritual discipline of fasting and spiritual disciplines in general to the bringing of justice. To be continued…

Pastoral Reflection

There is more than one parallel between this gospel reading and our lives: we, like Jesus, are preaching and our assemblies are like the synagogue crowd. Also, like Jesus, generally speaking, there exist communities and individual people that nourished and nourish us. God is calling us to tell truths, as we understand them, to people that nourish us, in spite of the possibility that they will respond in anger. Further, Jesus speaks about a specific issue—he heals people, and he also challenges people to connect their spiritual disciplines with justice, literally.

Since we are human, and sinners, we don't always do this well. We can strive to be like Jesus, and we will still mess up. What gets in our way of preaching difficult messages—like this—to people that have cared for us? What gets in our way of making bold statements about the implications of being baptized children of God, the priesthood of all believers? What gets in our way of hearing a royal proclamation to bring about God's Commonwealth today? What gets in our way of hearing that God's Commonwealth belongs to us, too, as the radical good news that the people of Nazareth, living under Roman occupation, heard?

Anne Lamott speaks to this dilemma, too, and why we might feel afraid to be as bold as Jesus might. She says,

> I think [a comment that there is only one Christian writer who tells

14. "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them (Luke 12:24)." In Luke 23:29, "Blessed are the… breasts that never nursed." "They asked for a reconciliation, because their country depended on the king's country for food" (Acts 12:20).

> the truth] means that there's a lot of pressure to -- certainly within the Christian churches -- to talk about the stuff that's sanctioned scripturally according to whatever faction you are a part of…as if they are sure of what they are saying and as if they are living the Christian life and it's just is going so much better than they could have ever hoped and they don't hate anyone and they forgive easily.[15]

Now, imagine what Anne Lamott would say after hearing Jesus' words about freeing all captives, literally. Perhaps it would go something like this, "I think that there's a lot of hope and freedom to talk about what every Christian is called to do. If Jesus thought that the people of Nazareth, living under Roman occupation, had opportunities to work for justice for ourselves and for others, Jesus is proclaiming that to us. Today." CGM

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 31, 2010

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

First Reading

If you did not have cause to read the comments for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, please read those—they are important in understanding this text. In short, before we reach verse 21, Jesus has gathered with the people of Nazareth in Galilee, his hometown, with whom he reads from the Isaiah scroll and lays out his mission. As we move into this week's pericope, "all in the synagogue" appreciate the wisdom of Jesus and at the same time feel anger toward Jesus' message. They would have heard Jesus' mission as heresy and considered Jesus to be a false prophet rather than the Son of God. Jesus uses apocalyptic images and language to reveal truth about him and those gathered in the synagogue.

Initially, it appears that all in the synagogue view Jesus favorably. It was probably an honor for Jesus to teach in the assembly, and they comment that Jesus delivers "gracious words" and remark that Jesus is "Joseph's son." Jesus also amazes *(ethaumazon,* which one could also translate as marvel) the synagogue.

While these seem like affirming testimonials, there is another dimension to them, which may explain why Jesus responds as he does—all of these statements address Jesus as if he were human, rather than the Son of God bringing in a new age. Other people deliver gracious words, as well as inspire awe *(ethaumazon)*.[16] In addition, another way to look at the comment that Jesus is "Joseph's son" is that Jesus is the son of a human, rather than God's son.

At the same time, *ethaumazon* appears in other biblical passages where God breaks into human lives in a dramatic way (at the Pentecost and with Zacharias, for example). This is a revelatory moment—or to connect this reading to the season, a

15. Anne Lamott, "A Conversation with Anne Lamott." Writer's Symposium by the Sea. Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, California. 2 Apr. 2007.

16. In Acts 6:8, for example, "[Stephen] was full of grace and truth." Acts 2:7 tells of onlookers seeing John and Peter and are, "amazed and astonished." The amazement and astonishment happen in connection with the Pentecost experience. Further, it happens with Zacharias in the temple (Luke 1:21), and a second time with Peter and John in Acts 4:13.

moment of epiphany. Jesus understands that the people of Nazareth will not continue to see his words as positive. This is what Jesus means when he says that they will quote the proverb/parable, " 'Doctor! Cure yourself!'…and 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" Jesus is not only explaining what will happen. He is also telling them that they (the people of Nazareth) will expect things of him that he will *choose* not to do. *Ethaumazon* can be a positive, as we read formerly. It can also be "tainted with criticism" and, in this case, illustrate that the people like Jesus' character more than his message.[17] This text functions in a way, so that "the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed."[18] Another way to say this is to say that the people of Nazareth of Galilee understand that Jesus is important, and says wise things, and at the same time, feel deeply challenged by his radical message and Jesus brings that forward.

Pastoral Reflection

It is difficult to find the grace in this reading. Jesus hands out deep judgment on the people of Nazareth. Not only does he offer up the foreshadowing about what would happen at Capernaum (miracles that he refused to perform at Nazareth), but also Jesus refers to Elisha and Elijah, whom the synagogue assembly would have connected to times of judgment.

The grace seems to come at the end of the reading when Jesus transcends an attempt on his life and continues on his mission. While this text foreshadows the suffering that Jesus will undergo because of human fear, misunderstanding and as a reaction to the threat of outsiders, it gives an example of the power of Jesus to "go on his way" and transcend the ways in which humanity attempts to do him in. In a way, it is a beautiful image—Jesus riding off into the sunset and on his way to minister to lepers and widows elsewhere.

The image of Mary Poppins comes to mind—depression-era London, a dysfunctional family, and the world of children, into which Mary Poppins enters and stays as long as they need her and then leaves. (The Jesus in this text is more the Mary Poppins of the novels by P.L. Travers in which she is a truly frightening character, not syrupy at all). She enters into a familiar world, yet reveals their flaws, vulnerabilities and prejudices. The Banks family does not realize how much they need her until she is gone. In a way, Mary Poppins is also an apocalyptic character and P.L. Travers used fantastical images to reveal the class disparities of the time—Travers used a nanny, who would have been a lower-class woman, to reveal truths about society at the time.

What do we appreciate in the way that the people of Nazareth appreciated Jesus? At first, he appears to be a wise and devout teacher, and then Jesus begins to challenge the social order. Are there things that we view as sacred, perhaps more sacred than the true mission of the gospel? What do we fear losing that holds us back from understanding Jesus more deeply? What do we experience in awe (perhaps tainted with criticism) that are actually examples of God revealing more to us? Where is Jesus working in our lives to reveal how much we need him? Where is Jesus working in our lives to reveal how much the world needs him? CGM

17. Paul Hertig, "The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Reversals of Fortunes" *Missiology: An International Review* (Volume XXVI, No. 2, April 1998). 169.

18. Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1972) 60.

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