October 2000 Volume 27 Number 5

You Can Go Home Again

CURRENTS in Theology and Mission

Currents

in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

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CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month). February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: $15.00 in the U.S.A., $20.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: $29.00 in the U.S.A., $39.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: $42.00 in the U.S.A., $57.00 elsewhere. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *ATLA Religion Database*, *Elenchus*, *IZBW*, *NTA*, *OTA*, *Religion Index I* (formerly *IRPL*), *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, and *Theologische Literaturzeitung*.

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

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You Can Go Home Again

After four and one half months in Cambridge, England, we headed home to a joyous welcome by daughters and sons-in-law, by grandchildren real and expected (you'll have to trust me on the last one), by fellow parishioners, colleagues, friends, and neighbors. No matter that we had a six-hour layover in Montreal, or that we faced a mountain of mail and unread magazines, or that the leak on the back porch roof was worse than ever. We were home.

An orange diskette crammed with more than four hundred electronic pages bears witness to my Dean and the seminary Board of my stewardship during my sabbatical leave, just as many of you who are pastors, diaconal ministers, or associates in ministry render an annual account of your stewardship to the bishop's office. But bibliography and statistics are not our real Vita, our real life, and our successes and failures in equipping the saints for their work of ministry are known, but mostly unknown to us. Always aliens and exiles, we are also at the same time fellow citizens with the saints, members of God's household; we are public figures with private lives. Consider the following essays as little boosts in your effort to make Vita—with a capital V—out of vita.

Michael Rogness thinks preachers face theological and rhetorical challenges. There is no substitute for good preaching. Or better: There is no substitute for one person telling another the gospel, whether it be from the pulpit, in the Sunday School room, in the living room, or on the street. Part of the theological challenge of preaching is to recapture the offensiveness of the gospel. Some preachers burden their people into depression with law and little gospel; other preachers reduce God to a nice old man who forgives everybody no matter what. In the public sphere the politicians need their religious convictions to be generic; from the pulpit we need to be specific. Here are five guidelines for preaching: convey the biblical message; connect it to the lives of the listeners; organize it well; deliver it well; and then draw a circle around the other four, titled "With Passion and Intensity." The problem with Lutheran worship is not heresy nearly so much as simple boredom. We want to feel some electricity from the preacher.

John W. Vannorsdall knows that preaching is a reciprocal interrogation between what has been handed down and what is new in the immediate situation. He asks, however: At what level do we know the lives and feelings of the people among whom we preach? The process of communication depends

in part upon our willingness to learn from those we would teach. We ignore the corporateness of sin because pastors have themselves thought in terms of personal sins. Even when we know that our most grievous sins are those which are committed corporately, we have difficulty making this a reality for others. Consider these nuggets: There is a difference between laying on the gospel and creating landscapes within which the gospel and present circumstances intersect. What can this emphasis on the Cross mean except that it is of the continuing essence of God to suffer the abuse, indignities, and death which we bestow upon one another? The Bible is a witness to both the God who draws near and to the same God who keeps distance. The Sacrament is not a substitute for the sermon's intent and contribution.

Paul F. Goetting, an expert on organizational studies and conflict, writes about the controversy within the ELCA on the recent agreement on full communion with the Episcopal Church. He attempts to help both "sides" see what they are communicating to their brothers and sisters and how they might make this dispute an opportunity for growth. Regardless of how fair leadership may seek to be, for those who are already on "the other side," there is in many cases a feeling of an abuse of power. He offers some advice worth considering by all parties: First, neither side has a right to cloak the issue in righteous terms. That goes for those who say that opponents of the agreement will face the judgment of God and for those opponents who claim that their stand is the only one faithful to the Word alone. Second, we need to keep the debate focused on the issues, not on personal attacks. Third, we must actively listen to each other. Fourth, as we listen, we must rebuild trust. Fifth, we need to work more from the bottom up, while we work at the top. Can the ELCA and its factions teach and lead, modeling for our congregations the engaging of issues with honor? *Currents* welcomes and invites responses to this article and essays that address the Episcopal agreement in a positive or a critical fashion and that model for our congregations the engaging of the issues with honor. Paul also invites e-mail conversations; write to him at *pgoetting@aol.com.*

Two years ago the faculty of **Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary** issued a position paper on "Spirituality and Spiritual Formation" that is printed in this issue, with the permission of President H. Frederick Reisz. Its three parts deal with Spirituality in light of the Lutheran Confessions; Christian Spirituality: Ecumenical Affirmations; and the shape of spiritual formation. Spirituality will be the theme of LSTC's Leadership Conference in February, 2001. Spirituality is a hot topic in both the parish and the seminary.

Bradley Hanson hails this document as a substantive and constructive contribution to Lutheran reflection on these topics but raises three points on which he thinks further conversation is needed. He suggests that the definition

of spirituality in the document is too narrow. He sees Lutheran spirituality as faith shaped by the Lutheran tradition of theology, nurtured centrally by word and sacraments in the Lutheran Christian community, and expressed in Christian vocation. Prayer in the document is too focused on *oratio*, in his opinion, with inadequate attention to *meditatio*. In his third concern he asks whether every Christian's personal discipline must include some conscious, explicit thought about baptism.

David S. Yeago, the chief drafter of the seminary statement, responds to Hanson's concerns and defends the viewpoints expressed in the statement. He believes that the document's narrower definition of spirituality calls attention to the widespread forgetfulness of spiritual formation and of the very idea that congregations might be formative communities. He suggests that Lutheran forms of spiritual practice are already involved with wider Christian traditions of belief and practice, thus accounting for the ecumenical emphases in the faculty statement. He admits that the faculty paper did not deal directly with *meditatio* or contemplation because that is a complicated issue and their goal was only to articulate a normative framework within which such complicated issues could be discussed. Finally, he defends the emphasis on baptism since it is the definitive act of God by which God's act in Christ becomes the form of *my* life. Along the way he explicates and provides the rationale for the faculty statement. We trust that the dialogue initiated by this pair of articles will be continued as all of us struggle to promote spiritual growth in ourselves and in others.

Ralph W. Klein provides an in-depth look at a recent history of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, written by Mary Todd, and focusing particularly on questions of authority, ministry, and the role of women. Early on Todd laments that in the LCMS there is neither a professional female theological voice nor a visible feminist minority. Happily, her own person and scholarly work are a partial rebuttal to this deficiency.

What does it mean to go home? It can refer to a return to familiar surroundings and a safe haven, to nostalgia and to isolation, to first principles and to old patterns. But going home for me means going back to the Scriptures and their central, liberating message, to daily dying and rising, and to the challenges of living in the dawning days of the twenty-first century, with all their promise and threat. I needed to retreat to England to find time and leisure to get my scholarly act together, but now, at home, and with you, I am ready to live out the dare of the gospel in a world and a church made sacred by our ability to disagree with honor.

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Why Isn't Good Preaching Working?

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The title is deliberately in the form of a question. It is a question we all face, and I don't have all the answers. Some of what I say may strike you as relevant, some not. But we all need to think seriously about this, because in our tradition we are deadly serious about the task of preaching.

After twenty years of preaching myself, I have spent many of my last fifteen years as a seminary teacher sitting in the pew listening to sermons. Listening to sermons is a whole different experience than preparing and preaching them, so I hope my perspective will be helpful to you.

Also, I have led an adult forum in many congregations titled "How to Listen to a Sermon." At the end I give everybody some paper and tell them, "I lecture to future pastors about preaching. You folks have listened to a lot of sermons. What would you like me to tell these students?"

The exercise is like taking the cork out of a pressurized champagne bottle. They write like mad. Obviously they have thought many times during sermons, "I wish I could tell preachers to. . . ." Their comments have helped shape every homiletics lecture I give.

With all the suggestions I have received from laypersons, plus my own experiences in the pews, plus fifteen years teaching homiletics, I have divided the suggestions I have for the improvement of preaching into two categories: the theological challenge and the rhetorical challenge.

The theological challenge of preaching

There is strong evidence that we have lost our nerve in preaching. Or is it that we've lost our confidence in preaching? I listen to many preachers who speak as if they don't really believe preaching is that important, and there are a lot of people who simply don't believe that preaching is effective in our day and age.

There are several reasons for this. There is no doubt, for example, that in this age of feverish, fast-moving entertainment people tend to get bored easily. The long-winded, boring old windbag in the pulpit is a favorite cartoon subject, and even we preachers seem to believe the stereotype. We know that preaching must appeal to the heart and to the will, not just to the brain, but we Lutherans aren't very good at that, neither by our history nor by our nature. Our preaching is traditionally a "head trip," aimed at explaining the text with theological integrity and good sense. Yet we are told that people are more oriented to experience and emotions than to an intellectual exercise. We

are constantly reminded that worship needs to address not just the brain but other senses as well—sight, sound, smell, touch—but we wonder how to adapt our preaching to what seems to be a new reality in communication. In the language of the old Greeks, our listeners are not so Appolinarian anymore, but more Dyonisian.

Some months ago I picked up a book from the seminary freebie shelf. This is where people put books they no longer want, and where families deposit the books of Uncle Albert, the pastor in the family who died. This little book was published 28 years ago by John Drury, "chaplain and fellow of Exeter College, Oxford." Inside the front cover is stamped in big letters, RETURN TO REVEREND H. A. TIMMERMANN. I know nothing about John Drury, but I took the book because the title fascinated me: *Angels and Dirt*. It turned out to be about theology and preaching, and in large measure it asked why the task of preaching is more difficult now and why we seem to have lost our nerve at the task.

Chapter 1 begins with a quotation by Richard Baxter, who wrote, ". . . so much preaching is lost among us, and . . . [we] have such languishing and starved souls." Then the author starts off with these paragraphs:

> The recipe for making theology is simple: God and man. A theologian is nothing more or less than a person who is interested in those two beings and how they belong together. Just as the recipe is simple so will be the serving of the final dish; but life in the kitchen [read "pulpit"] is very different. It is a continual crisis which makes cooks at work [read "preachers"] notoriously touchy people. Things can easily go wrong: a lack of balance in the flavours, faulty timing, and the whole thing is spoiled. In moderately well-to-do houses of the old days all this was kept well out of sight. The lady of the house would summon cook and establish the week's menus. Dishes would then arrive at the table, cooked in the manner to which the family was accustomed. All that has changed now . . . the tradition is not as definite as it used to be. Holidays abroad have given people a taste for outlandish dishes just as the Indian Empire once gave Englishmen a liking for curry. What we eat and how to prepare it has become everybody's business and, at the same time, much more varied.
>
> . . . Books like John Robinson's *Honest to God* and (more impressively) Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* have broken down the dividing wall and opened to the startled public the view of a theologian [read "preacher"] at work, wrestling with difficulties, wondering, exploring, getting things wrong and getting things right. It is like those contemporary restaurants where a plate-glass window allows the public to see into the kitchen. . . .

I have grown to like this book very much, but I have never found in the book itself the title that grabbed my attention in the first place, "Angels and Dirt."

All these difficulties of preaching today are true, of course, but the truth is that *there is no substitute for good preaching!* By its very nature worship will always be a combination. In part it is the rich language of traditional liturgy and hymnody, which has stood the test of time and becomes deeply embedded in our hearts and souls. On the other side, people in the pews come with the expectation that somebody will stand up and say from his/her own heart and life what the Scripture passages mean for us today. There is no substitute for one person telling another the gospel, whether it be from the pulpit, in the Sunday School room, in the living room, or on the street.

Even if it is true that we preachers have lost our nerve, lay people certainly haven't. Ask people on synod staffs when they survey congregations looking for a pastor. What

are they looking for? Preaching—always at or near the top.

Dr. Lori Carrell, Communications Professor at the University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh, surveyed pastors and laypersons across the denominational spectrum to determine the state of preaching in this country today. She published her findings in her recent book, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Press, 2000). When she asked how important preaching was, she discovered that lay people rated the importance of sermons higher than the preachers themselves did. When she asked both preachers and lay people how long a sermon should be, both Protestant and Catholic lay people wanted them longer than the respective Protestant pastor or Catholic priest.

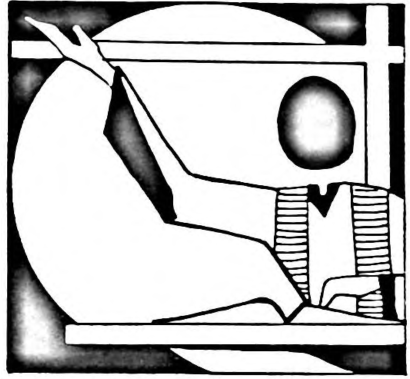
Typical complaints

When I talk to people about preaching—whether lay people, other pastors, or my faculty colleagues—I hear a lot of complaints that I would categorize generally as theological: "superficial," "fluffy," "lightweight," "not much substance," "just a lot of stories strung together," and so on.

What does this mean? More important, how can preachers evaluate themselves? How can preachers know whether their preaching makes theological sense? Think about that with your own preaching.

I haven't got time to review all the possible theological topics which preachers need to consider as they evaluate their preaching. Here are just a few:

Theology as upsetting. The Apostle Paul asserted that the gospel is nonsense to the Gentiles and scandalous to the Jews. Part of the theological challenge of preaching is to recapture that offensiveness of the gospel. The gospel is a glorious message, but it is neither nice nor soothing. It is



jarring, particularly in our affluent and materialist society.

We have lost the sense of what the sermon is, what preaching is for. Or maybe we have simply narrowed our scope of preaching. We are best at explaining what the text says. I do not want to minimize the importance of that at all. But preaching is more than explaining the text. We are less good at surprising, jarring, upsetting, opening new horizons, firing the imagination, transforming hearts and lives.

Jesus certainly did all these things. We think of the Prodigal Son as a really nice story. It is that, of course, but put yourself in the place of the first audience to hear it. With each turn of the story, you would think, "That's crazy; it would never happen that way." What son would be so audacious as to ask for the inheritance before the father dies? What father would give half the property to some smart-aleck young son with no sense of responsibility? Nobody would do it that way. Then the foolish boy wastes it, and the father takes him back with no demands for amendment of life? It would never happen; it shouldn't happen! The only sensible person in the whole story is the elder brother, the only one who acts as

a sensible, responsible person would—and he ends up as the lost son. It's a crazy story, thoroughly irresponsible.

Theological ruts. One thing I'm quite sure of, in good measure from my own experience, is that we preachers tend to settle into our own favorite themes.

After preaching for a few years, we all develop our favorite themes. At the drop of a hat, with no preparation whatsoever, I can preach a fine sermon on John 10:10, "I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly." It's probably my favorite preaching verse in the Gospels. I can take off with that verse like an F-16 jet fighter, complete with biblical context and good illustrations.

A parish pastor preaching to the same people Sunday after Sunday has to guard against that. Since last fall I have been helping out a friend of mine whose associate left, so once again I am preaching regularly to the same people, and I have to begin thinking all over, "Have I played this particular theme too repeatedly?"

I receive the weekly sermon from a very prominent preacher. He is a very good preacher, enormously well read, and he uses illustrations better than any preacher I know of. But over the years I have realized that he's playing on one drum. He's the best preacher of 1900 I know of, a wonderful example of what we called 19th century liberalism: "God is up there, Jesus is giving us an example of how to live, and the Holy Spirit is with us to spur us on." That's all true, of course, but there is nothing of the grisly agony of the crucifixion there, and very little of the "woes" Jesus hurled at the complacent Pharisees. He's a wonderful preacher, like Itzak Perlman on the violin, but Mr. Perlman is great because he plays on all four strings.

Thank God for the lectionary, because that's one thing that does force us to stretch ourselves. However, I do believe that people who are in ruts can find their ruts in just about any text! In my first parish the word about a neighboring pastor was that he always preached about alcohol, no matter what the text. (He was against it.)

Law and gospel: talking about God

Other denominations are baffled by what they perceive to be a Lutheran obsession with "law and gospel." However, the polarity exists in every theological tradition, though with different labels: "command/promise," "sin/grace," and so on.

The underlying question is: How do we talk about God? The Bible tells us of a God who gives the law, becomes angry and judges sinfulness severely. The Bible also tells us of a God of infinite love for his wayward people and a seemingly unlimited capacity for mercy and forgiveness.

Tip the scale to one side or the other in preaching, and we are not speaking about the God in the Bible. Some preachers burden their people into depression with law and little gospel; other preachers reduce God to a nice old man who forgives everybody no matter what.

Martin Luther said that the heart of preaching is to distinguish rightly between law and gospel. It was true in the 1500s and is true today. The dangers of legalism on one side and antinomianism on the other are potential pitfalls for every preacher, in every century.

How can a pastor know? Ask yourself, What's the *overall tone* of my preaching? Do my people leave church Sunday after Sunday nourished by the good news of what God has done for us, without whitewashing or denying what's wrong with the world and with each of us? Or do our people leave church feeling vaguely guilty or convinced

they aren't very good? Am I preaching about a God of both judgment and mercy? Am I preaching about a world which regularly disobeys God's ways but which God still loves with infinite passion?

The challenge of "civil religion"

We live in a religious climate, where a rather generic view of religion is shared by millions in our society. This is not the place to discuss the nature of this "civil" or "popular" religion, but you all have a good idea what it is: Religion is a private matter; God is a good guy, "the man upstairs," very benevolent; sincerity of faith is more important than content; Christians lead very moral lives, etc.

Election years always bring American civil religion to the fore. On the cover of the February 7th issue of *Newsweek* magazine, above the two pro wrestlers on the cover, is the title "God and Politics." Kenneth L. Woodward quotes Eugene McCarthy, who once observed that in Washington, D.C., two kinds of religion are tolerated: vague beliefs strongly affirmed and strong beliefs vaguely expressed. Woodward concludes, "The lesson for candidates seems to be: if you want to be president of all the people, invoke a generic deity everyone can salute" (p. 32).

Woodward goes on to say that for some reason religion is even more an issue in this year's election than in previous years. George W. Bush is pictured speaking with a picture of Jesus in the background, and he avows that his "heart belongs to Jesus." In last Friday's *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, Newsday columnist Robert Reno quoted George W. Bush naming Jesus as his favorite "political philosopher."

Vice-President Al Gore, not to be undone, reminds people that he studied for a year at Vanderbilt's Divinity School, not mentioning that his chief topics were primitive religions and contemporary mind-body philosophy, in addition to the Old Testament prophets. Today he states, "I am a Christian, I am a Protestant, I am a Baptist," although according to Woodward he is not affiliated with any actual congregation. John McCain, Steve Forbes, Alan Keyes, Gary Bauer, and Bill Bradley have also hastened to speak about their religious affiliations and faith in God.

My point is not to denigrate in any way the sincerity of these people and what faith means to them. If they are honest and sincere, I can only applaud their willingness to state openly the importance of their faith. My point is that we must understand that politicians play a quite different ball game than we preachers do. In the public sphere they need their religious convictions to be generic; from the pulpit we need to be specific.

The views of American civil religion are broad and vague; the gospel we preach is focused, very focused. Civil religion will always be a *theologia gloriae*; preaching centers on *theologia crucis*. Civil religion is as vague as possible, unfurling a wide umbrella so that everybody can fit in; the gospel calls a spade a spade and lets the chips fall where they will. Civil religion sounds comforting; preaching law and gospel will always be scandalous, jarring, and offensive.

The goal of civil religion is to give people what they want and to affirm the society around us. The preacher's task is to offer people what they need and to help us see society around us realistically. This is not an easy issue, because in many ways the gospel does give people what they want, and there is a lot about society we can affirm.

But always, always with the cross of Jesus in the middle of preaching, there is a

judgment which is not likely found in the world, and the gospel offers a grandeur which an individual standing with our own limited needs would never know.

William Willimon, Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, named this temptation to accommodation as a struggle he faces as a preacher:

> One danger I face when preaching to strangers is that in my earnest efforts to spread the gospel, I end up offering less than the gospel. Or I try to crank the gospel down to something that anybody staggering off the street can get in five minutes. Or I try to say, "Let's see, are you interested in self-esteem? Well, salvation is something like that." Or, "Would you like to feel better about yourself? Well, Jesus can help you." I think we need to keep being reminded of how odd it is that we preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (*Ministry*, November 1999, pp. 5–7)

As an example of preaching that takes into account the cultural situation and then addresses it with the claims of the gospel, Willimon cites Paul's sermon in Athens, Acts 17. Paul acknowledged the religious sensibilities of the Athenians by mentioning how many shrines they had to their panoply of gods and goddesses. Then he pointed to the "shrine of the unknown god" and proceeded to tell them who this God was, and he ended by speaking of a resurrection, which flew in the face of what any straight-thinking Greek believed in. The result was that they mocked him for such a preposterous idea. Only a few were converted, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris. A great sermon, but not a really successful one as we would measure success.

William B. Lawrence examined four prominent Manhattan preachers from the 1920s to the mid-1950s—Harry Emerson Fosdick (Baptist, then Presbyterian, then nondenominational at Riverside Church), Ralph Sockman (Methodist), Paul Scherer (Lutheran) and George Buttrick (Presbyterian) in *Sundays in New York; Pulpit Theology at the Crest of the Protestant Mainstream, 1930–1935* (Evanston, IL: The Scarecrow Press, 1996). He concludes that Scherer and Buttrick "stood authentically in the heritage of the Reformers," but the theology of Fosdick and Sockman "was a set of doctrinal propositions that contradicted the fundamental tenets of Protestantism. In effect, they . . . became shallow offerings of false doctrine; thereby, theological consent was granted to The American Way of Life" (pp. 225–26). Without arguing the validity of the author's thesis, my point is that each of us needs to examine our preaching to guard against simply reflecting the popular religious tone of our society, thus watering down the fullness of the biblical proclamation.

The challenge of decision theology

Just last week I spent time with a veteran pastor who has resigned without call. For twelve years in his parish he was dogged by a few families who said he never spoke about "accepting Jesus as our personal savior." Their constant carping wore him out, and now he's working in a garden nursery. (He actually likes it very much, because, as he says, you can really *see* the results of your work grow, unlike preaching!)

The predominant tone of American Protestant preaching is that the listener needs to "make a decision to accept Jesus." Lutherans are wary of this kind of language, because it makes my decision the active agent in my salvation: I am saved because I made a decision. Faith is the *work* that saves me.

On the other hand, the experience of many people is that they did indeed "make

a decision for Jesus," and to deny that is to suggest that we are mere puppets in the hands of a determinist God, who pulls the strings of some but not of others. Furthermore, as Christians live their lives, we do in fact "decide" constantly how to live as disciples.

The task of the preacher is a delicate one. We affirm that faith is a gift of God's Spirit within us, not a work. The decision to believe might seem like an accomplishment of our will, but it is God's work. Yet, we continue to ask God's guidance and strength that we will make decisions in life that will follow God's will for us.

There are many more theological topics we might discuss. Do we narrow down our talk about Jesus? Do we encompass the fullness of both justification and sanctification? Do our theological reflections really touch the lives of our people? Does the breadth of our theological view stretch to the whole of God's creation, or is it limited only to an individual's own faith? Do we share the same burning concern for society and justice as we find in the prophets? The questions could go on, and the reader will need to deal with them, but our space here is limited, so we need to move on.

The rhetorical challenge of preaching

I have not belabored my thesis that a lot of preaching isn't working these days because I am assuming you agree with me. However, preaching has never been universally successful or appreciated.

The biblical text for this fact is Paul's sermon in Troas. Even Luke, the presumed author of Acts, suggests that Paul was long-winded: "Paul continued speaking until midnight" (Acts 20:7). Furthermore, "there were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting"—how one does get drowsy when it's warm!—and young Eutychus "began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer." Unfortunately the lad was not sitting safely in a pew but was perched dangerously on a window sill three stories high. Down he went and was apparently dead when people rushed to his aid. Paul assured them that the boy was alive, then went back upstairs "and continued to converse with them until dawn" (20:7–12). Long sermons and sleeping listeners are not recent phenomena!

"There is perhaps no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons." A comment on today's preaching? Not at all. English novelist Anthony Trollope wrote that in *Barchester Towers* 143 years ago.

Not even the great reformer, with his immense confidence in the power of God's Word, was exempt from discouragement about preaching. On the Eve of the New Year 1530 Martin Luther announced to his congregation in the Stadt Kirche at Wittenberg that he was sick and tired of preaching to them several days a week for years. It didn't seem to do any good as far as he could see of their faith or lives. So he stomped out of the church and didn't resume preaching until the Wittenbergers left for the Augsburg Congress in early summer. When Luther remained behind at the Castle of Coburg, Duke Frederick ordered Luther to quit griping and get back in the pulpit, which he did.

So the various problems affiliated with preaching are not at all new. But they demand our attention as much as ever.

When our faculty revised our curriculum a few years ago, each of us had to present the goals of each course we taught and how the course would help students in their future ministry. Since the goal of homiletic instruction is to preach a good sermon, I presented our goal by defining a good ser-

> **I think we are boring people half to death, both in sermons and in the rest of the Sunday service.**

mon with a simple five-point outline. 1. Convey the biblical message. 2. Connect it to the lives of the listeners. 3. Organize it well. 4. Deliver it well. No. 5 was a circle all around the other four, titled "With Passion and Intensity." The first two deal with the theology and content of the sermon. The last three describe the rhetorical challenge.

Which is the greater challenge for preaching today—theology or rhetoric? content or public speaking skill? I'll stick my neck out and say that among Lutherans it is the rhetorical challenge. True, I have heard some pretty flabby theology even from Lutheran pulpits, but on the whole I think our seminaries do a fairly good job of preparing young preachers theologically.

Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Dean of the chapel at Calvin College, recalls the dreary Reformed sermons he heard in his youth as "simply another piece of heavy weather that children had to endure" ("Dancing the Edge of Mystery," *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*, September/October, 1999, pp. 16f.). He describes the beginning of a typical sermon on the parable of the Prodigal Son:

> Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, my theme this morning is the justification of Guilty Sinners. Three points, beloved, under the head of God's sovereign justification: firstly, its origin in the divine decree; secondly, its forensic realization in the satisfaction of Christ's righteousness; thirdly, its vindication in the eschatological glorification of the elect in life eternal.
>
> Firstly, then, its origin in the divine decree . . .

The theology was impeccable, but the sermons were terrible.

Now, however, says Pastor Plantinga, our problem may have swung over to the opposite extreme. He continues:

> Nobody preaches in a tailcoat anymore, or in language to match. Indeed, in some church settings the language has loosened up so much [as] "Lord, just help us, Lord, to just plug in to where you're at" that we yearn for middle ground between the kind of language that goes with tailcoats and the kind that goes with tank tops. Perhaps good pulpit language ought to find a level I'll call "upscale casual" or, maybe, "L. L. Bean colloquial," or a language which the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II describes as "noble simplicity."

I believe that the problem with Lutheran worship (maybe in other denominations too, but I speak for Lutherans) is not heresy nearly so much as simple boredom. I think we are boring people half to death, both in sermons and in the rest of the Sunday service. I speak as one who spends a lot of time in the pews, one who loves the wonderfully rich heritage of worship music and hymnody, and one who is bored a lot. If I'm bored, the people around me must be *really* bored. I think they often are.

I have heard sermons where I know the preachers well enough to know that they have a good theological foundation and have done their biblical work thoroughly. The sermon reads pretty well on paper, where you can look back and refresh your mind how things are unfolding or how they fit together, but as a speech it doesn't work. That's what I call the "rhetorical challenge."

The biblical foundation, the theological underpinnings, and the application of the message to the hearer's life is all there, but rhetorically it falls flat.

It's a moot point to argue which is more urgent, attention to the theological challenge or to the rhetorical challenge. The truth is, attend to one and not the other, and the sermon doesn't do the job. Neglect any one of the five items in my definition of a good sermon, and the preaching won't be effective.

Most of my suggestions for meeting the rhetorical challenge come from lay people. Here are some of them, listed roughly according to how frequently I hear them:

Don't read. I hear this all the time. This is frustrating to hear, because I write out my sermons. I have to do this to make sure I don't take off into the wild blue yonder on some fascinating tangent that comes to me all of a sudden, as if from the Holy Spirit. (I have learned the truth of one of Gerhard Frost's comments. He's one of our late beloved professors, now lecturing in the church triumphant. He said he finally figured out why preachers get more long-winded as they get older. It's because "everything begins to remind you of something else.")

What's frustrating is that once you've written a sermon you want to get it right from the pulpit, and most of us aren't capable of memorizing more than a sentence or two, so we read.

It's also not only frustrating, but downright perverse, that so many lay people are vastly impressed by a preacher who can preach with no notes, maybe no pulpit at all, even though the content of the sermon is so much schlock. I've heard some of those.

Trust me on this: lay people want you to look them straight in the eye and preach, with your attention on them, not on the paper in front of you. It's probably the influence of TV, where the speaker looks you straight in the eye and reads every word off the teleprompter, but that's another lecture altogether.

My first advice is to combine thorough preparation—for me that means a manuscript—with practicing it enough to do it without looking at the paper much. We're all different, so you need to figure out for yourself how you can do that best.

One central message. How many points should a sermon have? That used to be a standard question, and the Lutheran answer was often "three." The better answer is "one good one." You might divide that into two or three aspects of the main point, but every part of that sermon has to relate to that central message. The graphic symbol of a good lecture is a string of pearls, one thought following another sequentially. That doesn't work in preaching. The symbol of an effective sermon is a bicycle wheel: different spokes touching the rim, but every one of them connected to the center.

When I spoke with Dr. Carrell about her book *The Great American Sermon Survey,* she said that some people had complained that sermons were too long. When she asked why they were too long, the answer was always that they rambled. People didn't complain about the length of a sermon simply because it was too long. It was because the preacher strayed from the main point, or didn't make clear the connections to the main point. To the listener's ear the sermon rambled. People did not complain about the length of a sermon which stuck to the point.

Organize material to maintain curiosity and interest. People listen to a sermon when they wonder how it's all going to come out.

I suppose many of us here went through Eugene Lowry's *The Homiletical Plot,* one of the longtime standard texts in homiletics.

The book is in its 13th printing, rare for a textbook on preaching. Dr. Lowry never dreamed it would have that kind of staying power (and doesn't even think it's his best book). But there's a reason it keeps going, and that's because his advice is so very good: he says a sermon should be something like a drama, in films or on TV. A good drama hooks the audience, presents some kind of complication that captures our curiosity as we wonder how it's going to come out, and so we listen carefully.

You have heard sermons where you have wondered, "How is the preaching going to get out of this predicament?" That's the kind of "plot" that holds the attention of the listener. One of the reasons stories are effective is that the listener wonders how they will end.

Nonverbal factors

Communication experts tell us that how we look, speak, and gesture communicates as much as the words we say. Speaking as one who listens to a lot of sermons, how true this is! A student goes into the pulpit with a great sermon on paper, but as a beginner of course he's nervous. It's not easy preaching to a class of fellow students and a professor who is supposed to give a grade at the end of the semester. So he preaches this fine sermon looking as if he's about to throw up his breakfast. I was a student once, too, so I understand this and am not too upset. Some of the most frequent comments I make to students are, "Bring your personality into the pulpit with you." "Look as if you love to preach." "Of course you're nervous; you need to be to get the adrenaline going." This doesn't mean you have to rant and rave like a demented revivalist at a tent meeting. We have to be ourselves, but be ourselves with some life and vitality.

Friedrich Nietzsche, surely one of the most miserable sons of a Lutheran pastor in the history of the Christian church, said, "If they're saved, why don't they look saved?"

Concluding advice

As a summary, I'll speak as a sermon listener and summarize my own hopes for the sermon when I'm sitting in the pew.

I want to listen to a sermon on a biblical text and think, "I never really looked at it that way before," and hope that the younger generation will say in their own lingo, "Cool, man, that's different!"

I want to listen to a sermon and wonder how it's going to come out, rather than losing interest after five minutes and studying the stained glass windows.

I want to hear good illustrations that connect the text to human life. Illustrations that tell me how haywire life can become I can easily find in the newspaper. I expect such illustrations and have used plenty myself. But illustrations that really grab me are those when the preacher says, "I'll give you an example how this works," and tells me about a life changed and transformed by the work and presence of Jesus.

I want to sense that the preacher cares desperately about this message, loves to speak these words, because with the vast flood of verbiage in this world, these are the words which give life. I want to feel some electricity from the preacher.

I want the preacher to remind me constantly that my life is not merely a biological existence on this planet earth but that I am part of the cosmic drama of the universe, that I am part of that titanic struggle between good and evil, and that my part is hugely important, because I am a foot soldier right out there in the front ranks.

May God go with all of us as we step into our pulpits to deliver the wonderful gospel of Jesus!

Time, Tide and the Art of Preaching

John W. Vannorsdall
Orange, Massachusetts

Decades ago, a young woman in my parish married a pastor of the Congregational Church. Their second call was to an upscale parish and, soon after they moved in, an upscale parishioner invited them to dinner. On the way, they hit a deer. They stopped, called the state police, and then they called their hostess. When they finally arrived, their reception was less than cordial and the evening was strained. As they prepared to leave, they apologized again. The deer had come out of the darkness and they just couldn't avoid hitting it. The hostess was shocked. "You hit a deer? I thought you said that you had stopped for a beer."

Reciprocal interrogation

Some of you have read the 1994 book by Christopher Morse of Union Seminary, New York, *Not Every Spirit*. Buried on page 93 is a helpful description of what preaching is. "As commissioned address to a specific time and place," he wrote, "[preaching] necessarily involves a process of reciprocal interrogation between what has been handed down and what is new in the immediate situation. Such reciprocal interrogation is what preaching is all about."

A reciprocal interrogation between what has been handed down and what is new in the immediate situation. On the way home from the frosty dinner party, the pastor and his wife had to ask what allowed their hostess to misunderstand the phone message. Was it their poor pronunciation, or did they learn that their upscale hostess heard "beer" because the message came from the young, liberal, mid-scale new pastor, a graduate of liberal Yale? To understand what had allowed the misunderstanding was a part of the pastor's preaching task.

This is my first concern. At what level do we know the lives and feelings of the people among whom we preach? Why, in the area where I live, do men of all ages wear caps in restaurants? Caps with logos and names. Mine says "Gravely," but I could never bring myself to wear it in a restaurant. What's going on? I have to admit that I just don't know enough blue collar men well enough to find out what the wearing of caps means. I can preach in such an area, in the sense of "laying it on them," but I am handicapped in the interrogation of this hat-wearing circumstance.

My first call was to a rural parish and when an elderly woman died, I went to the farm and was greeted in the barnyard by the daughter. I said something inane, and the daughter replied, "Oh, Pastor, this is one of the happiest days of my life. My husband and I have never spent one day of our married life when my mother was not living

Teaching and learning are married . . . the process of communication depends in part upon our willingness to learn from those we would teach.

with us." A live-in mother was not part of my experience. I could lay on the gospel, but I was unprepared to interrogate either the gospel or her new circumstance.

I have no advice in this matter. I simply report that I am conditioned by my social class, that I am too often untaught by the people I would teach, and wonder if it is the same for you.

Last year I was asked to give a two-minute address at the graduation of 6th grade students. What brought inner tears were the boys in suits overwhelmingly too large, their brothers', in yellowed white shirts and their fathers' ties, and my imagining their being embraced by mothers who loved them so much that their hearts were broken because they could do nothing more to dress them well for this public occasion. And I still think to myself, "How can we understand the Cross if we haven't shared with the mother the brokenhearted embrace of a child in a borrowed suit?"

And it's not just a question of being isolated in our particular social class, but a matter of racial and ethnic experience. Large numbers of us who are white have given up any effort to enter into the present circumstances of African-Americans.

Years ago, I read two English-language newspapers of Lutheran bodies for the period of the Civil War. There was no reference whatsoever to the war or to slavery and only a small announcement when Lincoln was murdered. I was a seaman in a Navy program preparing officers during the second world war and only in looking back did I realize that there was not a single African American in our 300-person unit.

One day, while I was serving as a college chaplain, a young African American couple asked if I would co-sign a first mortgage at the bank. I knew that they didn't need a co-signer for a first mortgage and agreed to go to the bank with them the next day. We approached the secretary to the loan officer at the appointed time, and she said, "I'm so sorry, Mr. Vannorsdall, but he's gone to lunch. He didn't know that you were coming with them." I made a few deserved comments, and when we arrived again the next day, he was waiting at the door and assured us that no co-signer was necessary.

I learned from that experience that I had power that I had not been using. I am embarrassed for my own ignorance and prejudice, but I also feel that my church also failed me. I am determined to continue to find ways of naming biblical moral imperatives as they impinge upon my world and yours, my family under God. I consider it part of the work of preaching.

If preaching is, as Morse suggests, the interrogation of the gospel in light of present circumstance, and the interrogation of present circumstance in light of what has been handed down, then our maturity as preachers will depend in part upon our willingness and capacity to enter into the lives of the people before whom we stand.

Our lives as pastors, spouses, and parents are now so complicated. I think I know that. Though there are no records, it's

probably true that we make fewer parish visits than was once the case. There are both reasons and excuses for this. All I am comfortable saying is that mature preaching cannot be defined as laying on the gospel. Mature preaching will always be the creation of an intersection between the Word and a brokenhearted mother embracing her son in an ill-fitting suit, an intersection where Jesus of Nazareth meets an African American couple on the way to the bank. Our interrogation in either direction will always mean the effort to understand why some people wear caps in restaurants or hear beer when what we intended was deer.

We are called to be teachers and preachers in the church. It has become clearer to me over the years that teaching and learning are married, that the process of communication depends in part upon our willingness to learn from those we would teach. When teaching and learning are divorced or segregated, our teaching and preaching will be aimless and somewhat fraudulent. If this sounds like a lecturer's trash talk, consider the implications of the concept of multiple intelligences for those who think of themselves as the learned ones with the peasants gathered at their feet. Having written these things, I can only wish that I had known you better before attempting this lecture.

Interrogating our words

We can turn the coin over now and ask what it means to interrogate the gospel from the place of present circumstance.

Krister Stendahl in his Beecher Lectures some years ago said that one of the ten commandments for a preacher is to use the word "love" only when absolutely necessary. Some of us could put a whole list of words under the same rubric.

Take the word "salvation," for example. What does it mean? Not a dictionary definition, but what does it mean in the tradition and to me when I'm plowing snow or worrying about my children? Or perhaps we should ask, "What happens to me when the word salvation is laid in my lap, or when I actually think about it?" Not much, to tell the truth. Saved by the blood of Christ. Doesn't that mean that if I accept the gift of God's grace, I will someday enter into heaven? But suppose I am ambivalent about heaven? I wonder how many people want to be saved so that they can get into heaven.

Perhaps salvation is related not as much to heaven as it is to hell. When I was growing up, our pastor was good at hell, the whole notion of being cast into outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Darkness is bad enough, but outer darkness is too much, and salvation might well be embraced. In the context of hell, salvation could be appealing. But it's been years since I've heard much about outer darkness as a place to be cast. I wonder if I am the only pastor having trouble in using the word salvation thoughtfully.

Of course, we know quite a lot about the sins of the world. Within the past two weeks, it became public knowledge that up to a million East German women were raped during the Russian occupation. We know about the Nazi death camps, the slaughter of Cambodians, the massacres in Central Africa and in Bosnia, child labor in American coal mines, redlining, lynchings, and profiling. We know so much that we build barriers to preserve our sanity behind the mind's garden wall. But we know about the sins of the world. O God! Save your people. Lord, have mercy—upon them, the ones who have done these things. Let the missionaries now say, "Christ have mercy."

Why is it so hard to move beyond our personal hands-on sinning? The lust in my

heart, my occasional anger, my dislike of this person, my compulsions and many neglects. We know about sin in its personal forms. Why can't we see ourselves as a part of the human family, the people of God, a family and people who commit unimaginable crimes and violations of the intentions of God? This is where the necessity of salvation is clear.

In part, we ignore the corporateness of sin because pastors have themselves thought in terms of personal sins. And even when we know that our most grievous sins are those which are committed corporately, by our human family, we have difficulty making this a reality for others. It's true that we are held accountable for our personal actions. It is also true that the sins of our neighbors are visited upon us and ours upon them. Pogo has been a more articulate advocate of this understanding than have many of us. Just to imagine my complicity in the slaughter of innocents evokes in me the question and longing of Paul: "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

If, however, salvation for our personal sins and inclusion in heaven are simply background music from the little brown church in the dell, phrases which people have trouble engaging or embracing, then what other language can be used that accords with the biblical witness?

What about that salvation which is reversal? the promise of God in Christ that there will be a new heaven and a new earth? In my town I see so many girls pushing baby carriages. The national figure now is close to 50 percent of all children are born to single mothers. Sure, some will manage, and their children may be a joy to us all. But we know that most of these girls and their children will not have the opportunities, experience the vividness of light and the wonder of distant places, that is so much a part of our lives. Their fault, you say? If they say so, all right. But it just makes me angry if you say it's their fault. I believe, almost desperately, that by the grace of God their lot will be reversed. They will have a new beginning, they will be saved, if not in time, then beyond time. Perhaps I just want to believe this. Or is it that I believe this because I have been nurtured in the Word which is Christ who was and is this kind of reversal and who promised and promises through us that beyond justice, mercy will prevail?

I hope we agree that two things are true. There is within most of us the capacity for compassion. For Christians, compassion also rises out of our allegiance to a God who is compassionate toward us. One part of our calling, one opportunity for everyone, is to live out our compassion—with alcoholics, with all who are not beautiful or handsome, with Tutsis and with Hutus, with the diseased, the cast-off, the tax collector. Call it a matter of living out our God-given humanity. Call it our Christian vocation and imperative.

But there is a second affirmation that we also make. Ultimately, compassion's work will be completed not by us but by God. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and beyond justice, mercy will prevail.

A new beginning, a new heaven and a new earth—these are the current meanings of salvation for me.

I began this address with Christopher Morse's definition of preaching as the reciprocal interrogation of that which is handed down and the present circumstance of the hearer. There is a difference between laying on the gospel and creating landscapes within which the gospel and present circumstance intersect. I indicated my own sense of isolation within the community of the faithful, those who are protected by piety from the import of the tradition. I've

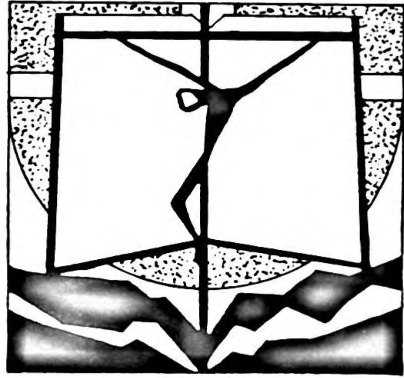
indicated my need and perhaps yours for exposure to those who live either skeptical or ignorant of Christian assumptions. And then, as an example of the interrogation of the tradition, I have asked whether the word salvation should be both broadened and used less often in a formulaic way.

Now I'd raise the issue of justice and mercy. We're high on mercy, on forgiveness, and soft on justice. At least that's my perception. When it comes to God, the people in the pew want to hear about mercy. Who can blame them? I want to hear about mercy, too. However, an English poet of the eighteenth century, Edward Young, wrote, "A God all mercy is a God unjust." Our secular judges must face this issue every day. God must face this issue every day. At what point does mercy undercut justice? When you allow the breaking of the law to go unpunished, you undercut the justice that is essential to life in community. We are able to live together in a civil society not because we are so forgiving but because we have a delicately balanced system of crime and punishment.

As pastors and theologians, you know that the justice of God also involves not just disobedience and mercy but disobedience, consequence, and mercy. The Cross of Jesus Christ is central in our understanding. The Cross declares that a God all mercy is a God unjust. The Cross proclaims that the justice of God requires accountability, that the account is paid by God, and that mercy is spoken always from the Cross.

This is so hard to say that most sermons simply ignore the issue of justice and center on our social responsibility or on the mercy of God which gives us a new beginning. Perhaps on Easter we find a way to say that the mercy of God always arises out of the tomb of Christ.

I suspect that part of our problem is the insistence that the Cross is a one-time event.



Of course, historically, that's true. It is also true, however, that God lives always with heartbreak. Heartbreak is the consequence of love. It is ultimately not just I who, in some fleeting way, behold the pain of the mother dressing a sixth grader in a hopelessly too-large suit. It is God whose love embraces the mother, the road-raged driver, the older person with no children who call, and the turmoil of the adolescent with nowhere to turn for knowledge of the world and insight concerning the self.

Even the most limited person in the pew must know that the death of Jesus was not the most hideous in human history. What can this emphasis upon the Cross mean except that it is of the continuing essence of God to suffer the abuse, indignities, and death which we, God's loved children, bestow upon one another? The price of injustice is to pay the cost of loving a human family constantly tearing itself apart. Justice requires a price when injustice occurs, and grief is that cost. It is out of the heartbreak of God, from the Cross, that mercy comes down to gather the pieces and to invite us to see a new day dawning.

What is the crown of thorns if not the hissing rising from two people in the midst

of divorce? What is the spear if not the grief of the mother holding a fly-bitten child starving in some waterless place? What are the nails if not shards of five-hundred-dollar bottles of champagne consumed while the urine of the homeless flows sullenly in the gutter?

I mean to say by these images that the language of the tradition, that we are saved by the blood of Christ, has become a cliche for many people, a toss-off the content of which is an unattractive mystery, a filler for the end of sermons when we have run out of preparation time. What does "blood of Christ" mean to the man or woman who picks up *Time* magazine and reads an eight-page ad for road racing that begins with the words, "No Bull—No Barriers" and ends with the words, "Let Freedom ROAR"? It means that the blood of Christ is the tears of God, the price of God's love, the penalty which justice requires and which God pays in order that mercy may be granted. It means the tears of God embracing a mother embracing a child in an ill-fitting suit.

I'm sure that you have found better ways to say this, but it may be helpful for you to share my struggle to interrogate the tradition.

Strange things happen to all of us, I suppose. One day I was at a wedding reception, always difficult for me, and introduced myself to a man leaning against the piano. "Oh, yes," he said, "I know you, and you are quite right. If you can't say no to God, yes to God has no meaning." I was glad to meet someone who could remember something that I'd said.

Is this another interrogation that needs to occur? Have we been too heavy on the power of God? God did this and God did that. "Let go and let God." Even faith is the gift of God, the working of the Holy Spirit. And no one wants to argue publicly that God might not be all-powerful—omniscient, omnipotent, and so forth. But isn't it important that preachers find ways of saying that God is self-restrained, that it is possible to say no to God? If we can't say no, then what does yes mean? We have enough tyrants, dictators, and assorted gurus who know the answers to all our questions and are certain about what we should do. Frankly, I'd be inclined to flee from a god who refused to keep some distance. A parent who won't keep some distance from sons and daughters is dangerous.

The Bible is a witness to both the God who draws near and to the same God who keeps distance. You know the story of Moses demanding that God be more present in the wilderness journey. God said no. "I will put you in the cleft of a rock and cover your face, and then pass by in all my glory. When I have passed by, I will take my hand from your face and you shall see my backside, the place where I have been, but my glory you shall not see." Of course! What does faith and trust mean if you have been slain by glory? The glory of God is in the face of Jesus Christ, but most people who saw and heard Jesus did not see any glory. Why is this? It is a gift of God, this hiddenness. It preserves the image of God which marks our creation and which allows us to stand and be accountable, not slaves but sons and daughters, people whose yes has meaning because God has given us the freedom to say no. Are there consequences for saying no? Of course, but better a no with consequences than to be victims of unconditioned power and the life of a slave.

Again, I haven't always found ways of interrogating this part of the tradition. I am convinced, however, that we are called upon to proclaim both the power of God and the ways in which God is self-restrained for the sake of our dignity, our integrity, our freedom. Praise the Lord for this wonderful and fearful gift.

Now I would like to conclude this part of the presentation and then say a few other things in a different way. So far, I have simply welcomed Morse's definition of preaching, that it is the reciprocal interrogation of both the tradition and of our present circumstance. I have suggested that if we are to interrogate the circumstances of those to whom we preach, we will of necessity breach the isolation of our social class and race and be intentional and invitational in doing that. It will not happen so long as we live in one or more forms of gated communities.

I have also tried to explore some of the meanings of words and phrases such as salvation, the relationship of justice and mercy, and the problem of preserving God's freedom to be God and our freedom to vote against God.

Abiding concerns

Now a short list of additional concerns.

The first is that the practice of weekly communion seems to have changed both our practice and our language. I certainly do not object to weekly communion. I do object to the change of designation from sermon to homily, and the objection is based on the purely practical reason that we think a homily takes less preparation—is somehow different from a sermon, which we know takes preparation time. I'm sure it is not true in the Midwest, but the pastors and seminary students with whom I talk now think about setting aside four or five hours for preparation. I admit that I am of another generation, but in my day, the time generally agreed upon was twelve to sixteen hours of preparation time. It seems logical to me that the result of, say, five hours will not be the same result as that produced in fifteen hours. The sermon will not be three times better, of course, but the additional time will surely produce a more salutary sermon.

Sometimes I hear the argument that whatever shortcomings there may be in the sermon is more than made up by the opportunity to participate in the Lord's Supper. The fallacy in this is the misunderstanding of preaching. The Lord's Supper is the heart of the tradition made visible and entered into by partaking. Preaching is the interrogation of that tradition. It asks the question, What does this mean? and it asks that question at the intersection where the circumstances of 21st century people encounter the witness of this ancient meal. The sacrament is not a substitute for the sermon's intent and contribution.

Next on my list is the denial that there is one way to preach. Years ago a pulpit committee came to hear me preach, and then they came a second time, and then they chose someone else. I called the chairperson. What went wrong? "Well, it was your preaching, pastor." I was crushed and told my wife Pat that the one thing I thought I did best was not good enough. She said, "John, you're taking this too personally." I was. "They want a different *style* of preaching," she explained.

My sister has made it clear that her idea of a good preacher is one who doesn't use a manuscript. The chairman of our church council where I now live and worship said this past week that he wanted a pastor who could shoot from the hip.

My point is simply that there are many valid ways of preaching. What is important is that we grow in our competence with the style or styles most appropriate for us, and that whatever the style, we create the intersection of the gospel witness and our particular time and circumstance.

Now a few thoughts about the use of images. All speech is composed of images, of course. Some words are so common that we don't think of them that way. Consider

> Life will probably be easier for pastors who ignore the issues that surface in our civil life. But can such preaching be called biblical?

the word "go," for example. "Go" evokes the image of motion. Place and time can be added. Go outside. Go quickly. The question is not whether we will use images, but whether the language we use will be effective in evoking within the hearer the thrust of the witness we intend.

We can get so fancy with our language that it attracts attention to itself rather than serving our purpose in using it. I have been writing a policy manual for the local schools, and in a statement concerning the rights of students I indicated that young children had the right to an amanuensis. Our Superintendent received a call from the State Department of Education. The staff in Boston had a field day with amanuensis. But how about the rest of the document? They'd get back to us on that.

I once used an account of my cleaning a chimney for two elderly men who lived in the house on the hill. It was a great image that served me well, except that as people left the church that morning the basic response was that I was too old to be climbing on roofs. The truth is, I may have been bragging, not preaching the gospel. Does that happen to you?

I raise a caution about sharing your private life in sermons. I really don't want to know what your spouse said at the breakfast table and, for the sake of your children, I prefer not to hear a lot about the cute things they say, or even the profound things.

Toward the end of his teaching career, Edmund Steimle urged us to use more earthy language, not to be afraid of the language of everyday. His images were certainly everyday images, but they never came close to coarseness. There is a line somewhere between language that is easily understood by everyone and language that is vulgar or offensive to more than a few. We need help from friends, parishioners, and spouses to evaluate the accessibleness of our language. The issue is not whether the language is elevated or common but whether the language is adequate for the biblical witness and the circumstances of our hearers.

Which brings me to the matter of continuing education, an area in which seminaries consider me a traitor. Whether our students are second-career or come directly from college, large numbers have only modest exposure to the liberal arts. So we have seminary students who are not well prepared in the language arts and are not acquainted with the intellectual and literary treasures of Western culture, to say nothing of the cultures of the mid- and far East. I am not a fanatic on this subject. I just raise the possibility that half of our continuing education be in liberal arts institutions, rather than through distance learning programs from the nearest seminary. My brother-in-law, a retired electrical engineer, takes at least one liberal arts course every year. His pastor does not.

I have just two other matters I'd like to place for discussion, and the first of these is our approach to social issues. I think that there is an important difference between preaching on social issues and preaching the gospel in ways that illumine social is-

sues. In our small town in western Massachusetts, it was decided at a town meeting that we had to turn off the street lights. We had to cut the budget. Recently, the issue was again on the floor at the town meeting. I had no intention of saying in a sermon that the lights should be turned on and taxes raised to pay for it. Neither did I say that they should be left off and taxes not be raised. What the members of our congregation faced was the question of whether to continue the danger of dark streets or to raise taxes for the elderly who were already living at the margin. All of us faced an issue to which there was no perfect answer. What was required of us as Christians was that we attend the town meeting, face the complexity of the issue, vote our best judgment, and ask the forgiveness of God. This much, at least, can be said from the pulpit.

I must be honest enough to say that life will probably be easier for pastors who ignore the issues that surface in our civil life. But can such preaching be called biblical? Earlier I indicated my conviction that the meaning of the word sin is weakened when we continue to ignore our corporate sin. The refusal to find ways of addressing moral issues in our civil life simply confirms the notion that we have our own God who forgives our personal sins, and that's it. What I find depressing is not just our failure to shed gospel light on social issues, but that even in the area of personal behavior the secular world is rapidly replacing the church. Ethicists are everywhere, from corporations to the Sunday newspaper supplement. The biomedical issues Joseph Fletcher described half a century ago are now slapping us in the face, but I see little evidence that our slumber is ending.

I want to be careful with my last concern, in part because I haven't found a way through the dilemma which I'll describe.

Some years ago, about a dozen of us, college chaplains, were gathered in a discussion group. We began to talk about what motivated us to enter the ministry. I think we were all amazed to discover that, except for one or two of us, the most powerful influence was church camp—Camp Luther, or whatever—the place where in the evening we all gathered around a campfire singing songs and hymns and the leader invited us to come to Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to pray for guidance, to ask forgiveness, to take up the Cross and, as we sang one more verse, to go silently to our cabins. A recent article in the *Boston Globe* indicated that the commitment of Robert Edgar, the new head of the National Council of Churches, had its origins in a church camp.

I was influenced in my pre-college years by a very conservative pastor, a biblical literalist, who firmly believed that the world was created in six 24-hour days and whose every sermon revolved around Christ's death for our sins.

What I have now come to affirm is that there is power in the conviction, the passion, the certainties and unconvoluted witness of the conservatives among us and in other traditions. I must also say that I cannot be among them. I see too much of the imperialism of religious conservatism. Moreover, I cannot escape what I find complicated or baffling, issues that are not simple and don't lend themselves to passionate abandonment.

So now when I preach, integrity requires that I both respect the conservative witness and give honor where it is due. I do not disparage those things which are, in fact, my own roots. At the same time I must be true to other visions, the complexities which have their own grandeur and which I believe are also the gift of God.

Thank you for an occasion to think about these things, and for the privilege of sharing my thoughts with you.

The Episcopal Agreement: Engaging Our Difference with Honor

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In the fall following the Denver ELCA Assembly, I telephoned a pastoral acquaintance now living in retirement in the upper Midwest. Following an exchange of greetings, he brought up the ELCA's decision on the Called to Common Mission agreement with the Episcopal Church (CCM) and blurted out: "Goetting, whose side are you on?" The question took me by surprise. The purpose of the call was to obtain counsel on a book I am trying to write. While we had not visited for many years, I knew him to be an open-minded Lutheran theologian who had a long career in editing. I assured him that I supported the CCM Agreement and that in New England there was very little opposition. To my surprise, he quickly let me know where he stood. He felt strongly that the ELCA had seriously blundered in the Denver decision. Our exchange shattered my simplistic image about the opponents of CCM.

In the summer of 1999, on my return from extended service abroad, I had relied on comments from a generally well-informed pastor in our area and a retired bishop in the Midwest. Both had assured me that the opposition to the CCM came primarily from Norwegian Haugeans, concentrated in the upper Midwest. I had long respected the Haugeans for their commitment to the ministry of all God's people, and, given their traditional discomfort with ecclesiastical authority, I understood why they would be troubled with CCM. The telephone exchange with my pastoral acquaintance and many subsequent conversations lead me to say that our young church has a serious problem and is experiencing a serious threat to its unity. I now realize there are strongly differing positions within various sectors of the church, not just among the Haugeans.

My career in many ways has focused on the study of organizations and conflict. My observations of the present dispute lead me to suggest that we review with a critical eye all that has been done and said and ask what might be done differently in the future. The church on the national level cannot afford unproductive conflict that drains its limited energy. Nor can the local congregation. The church at the national level ought to be a model for the local congregation in processing change and in handling conflict. In my judgment, we are modeling poorly. Let's see if there is something we can learn from our current circumstance.

Polarized

Someone once said there is good reason for being paranoid—there *are* people out to get you, especially if you are a leader. We learn early in public ministry that when we take a strong position, someone is sure to attack it. It does not take long to conclude that the church is made up of "us" and "them." "They" stand in the way of progress, and "they" make life difficult. We are told one must suffer for righteous causes. Some take President Truman's advice, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen," and they leave the ministry. Most of us learn to tough it out, grow thick skin, put our head down, and plow ahead. Whether we realize it or not, we may at times convey a strong message: "We're right; you're wrong. Begone!"

The problem is, "they" don't always give up, especially if, in their judgment (fair or unfair), they are unable to speak or be heard. Recognizing that leaders (again in their judgment) have all the power, especially power keeping them from being heard, they will find a way, and now (in the judgment of the leaders), a devious and destructive way. They will organize. They will threaten. They will do that which appears offensive and unreasonable to the leaders, who will conclude with even greater certainty the rightness of their position and the folly of their opposition.

When we back away from such a polarized condition, whether in the current churchwide trauma or in an emotionally divided congregation, every Christian surely confesses to being both embarrassed and offended. We realize that there must be a better way for the Body of Christ, the church, to live out its witness in unity with God and with one another.

What follows is based on a major premise: Leadership (bishops, pastors, church executives, editors, congregational presidents, those holding the reins of the organization), has by virtue of its office certain powers—powers not generally available to all. We are not speaking of the power of the Office of the Keys, but rather the power to set the agenda, to determine what issues get raised, who can speak, what information is shared, what information is withheld.

The exercise of power can be used in various ways—from generally respected practices, as the Presiding Bishop inviting a spokesperson from the Episcopal Church to address the Assembly before the vote, to a sarcastic comment in a church council meeting that is felt to be a putdown by the one who differs. Regardless of how fair leadership may seek to be, for those who are already on "the other side," there is in many cases a feeling of an abuse of power. As positions are threatened, as feelings are hurt, as opportunities to address the issues become limited, those on the "other side" feel shut out and become distrustful of their leaders. They become angry. The chasm deepens.

And now they—we—perform poorly. You know the feeling if you have ever been a minority on an emotional issue. Not everyone has the ability to speak well in conflict, especially if one is in the minority. Perhaps you have experienced this as a member of a board. You feel strongly on an issue; you feel differently than everyone else. Few of us can speak well when surrounded by the accusing judgments of others. Even though little is said, you feel the message: "Let's get on with the meeting" or "How dare you think that way?"

On a churchwide issue or in a congregational conflict, some may sense that they disagree but are not sure how to articulate their differences. They may feel intimidated by the strength and competence of

the majority but are not convinced of the rightness of the majority opinion. They hang low, and soon other voices are heard. Now they too get the courage to be identified. Their numbers grow. They make noise and gradually are heard by more. Others, for different reasons and interests, some not so noble, join the opposition; some even take the lead. From the majority side comes a condemnation: "Why didn't you speak up earlier? We gave you opportunities." Not all perceive it that way.

In the past year, opposition to CCM has seemingly grown. The opponents have organized and found media through which to address their grievances. But the issue has already been decided. The ELCA has spoken. The Presiding Bishop informs a Synod (technically he is correct): "You cannot address your disagreement to the Church Council. They cannot receive your objection. The ELCA has legally decided the issue; they have done so by two-thirds vote." Frustration and anger increase. The ELCA becomes more rigidly divided. Resolution is not in sight.

Depolarizing

I am certain that responsible folks at all levels of our church are concerned about the situation. We can do better. Consider the following—important churchwide and in any congregational conflict.

Neither side ought to cloak the issue in righteous terms. There may be exceptions, as when the church attacked racial discrimination in its midst or spoke out against the state's interference with the freedom of the gospel as in Nazi Germany, but, thank God, these kinds of issues are few. And certainly the Episcopal Agreement is not such a clear-cut righteous cause.

The most divisive feature in a church conflict is to assert that God is on one side and not on the other, that God's judgment rests only with the opposition. Some try playing God, declaring one side righteous and the other side sinful. When the conflict is judged in this manner, mutual conversation and consolation are no longer possible. Luther's statement should sober all deliberations: "Councils do err!" He knew the power and pervasiveness of sin, and so should we.

In April 1999, *The Lutheran* quoted a seminary professor of our church as having said, "That our church body would not be in communion with such a church [Episcopal] is something I believe we will have to answer for on the last day." If *The Lutheran* elects to print such a quote, it owes its readers at least a critical comment. Or should it even print it? Who would want to see such a statement in a parish newsletter when their congregation is in conflict? The condemnation and elimination of such rhetoric are first steps toward depolarizing the conflict.

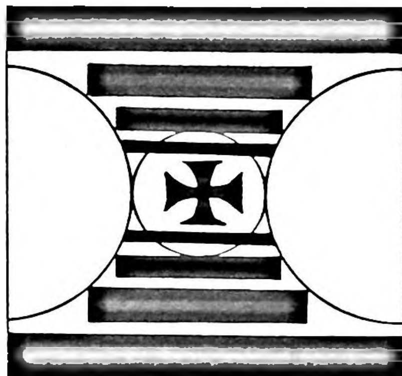
Nor do "righteous slogans" help. An organization opposing the CCM identifies itself with the phrase THE WORD ALONE! The problem here is the implication that only one side is committed to the Word. To suggest that one side alone is committed to the Word is simply offensive. The Word and the "Word alone" does not belong to one side in the dispute. Indeed, our theology of the Word may be the common ground around which to gather for greater clarity on the issues that seemingly divide us.

Let's avoid personal attacks; let's keep the debate focused on the issue. When a document like *The Commentator* uses language, as it did in its spring issue, accusing Bishop Anderson of "betraying" the church, the conflict takes a turn for the worse. In Christ's church, respect for each other must be maintained at all times regardless of the disagreement. The same holds true when a

congregation finds itself in conflict. Labeling and caricaturing only throw up dust, diverting attention from the real issues in the dispute.

We must actively listen to each other. From all sides, the language at times may be more like noise, tempting many to turn off and move on to other issues. Yet, as Christ's unique community, we cannot give up on each other. We must all, as St. Paul said, "bear one another's burdens." Christian love never suggests that we surrender our convictions or merely endure attacks. It does mean we take time and energy to listen, to be open. It does mean standing in the place of the opposition, feeling their pain, listening in a way that takes all parties to a new level of understanding—listening for points of common agreement, as our mutual agreement to the authority of the Word.

As we listen, we must rebuild trust. The ELCA's Office of the Secretary compiled and distributed at Synod Assemblies a review of the CCM issues in a question-and-answer format. From the perspective of many, all the right questions have been raised and appropriate answers have been given. The document provides what we might call the *hard side*. Missing is the *soft side*, the awareness that there are feelings of distrust among many who have opposed the CCM, feelings that some issues are not confronted or remain in contradiction. The Q & A material may meet the needs of the majority, but it does not yet deal with the underlying distrust felt by some. The loss of trust, from my experience, is seldom the fault of only one side, though each side sees the other as the cause. Some question, for example, whether *The Lutheran* provided an open and free forum on these issues as the proposals were announced some five years ago, causing for some a deeply felt distrust.



To regain trust, one ought to acknowledge, when it is true, that you too share a concern, that the situation is not just black and white, that one side is entirely correct and the other absolutely wrong on all points. No human controversy is ever so one-sided. One question I've been asked for which I have no simple response is this: If the historic episcopate is not of the *essence* of the church, why is it mandatory that Lutherans accept it? While one may appreciate (as I do) the symbolic character of the historic episcopate, is it not fair to ask: Does the agreement force us into a decision that offends our Christian freedom? Related is the question, How does one respond to a cry of conscience? Is that merely a rhetorical ploy to frighten us, or is it genuine? Christians have been generally sensitive to members of its community who claim they have a conscience problem with a decision. Here I think one ought to proceed with caution before condemnation, especially if the conscientious objectors are willing to accept costly consequences for their position.

There is also a need to listen for anxieties that might be held in common, like the abuse of power, a fear common to many of us. What power is granted by God to the

office of Bishop that is not given to the pastor? What power do Lutheran bishops now have, and how will that power be different once the historic episcopate is in place? The Q & A document simply insists there is no change. Others fear this may not be true, in spite of constitutional restrictions. Still some theologians supporting the Agreement argue that it will give a new and needed character to the office of Bishop. What is this something "new"?

Regardless which side one is on, we all need to keep in mind how easily unchecked power can become abusive. Some bishops who work with congregations in conflict may be tempted to draw on an additional but questionable source of power to bring peace to a troubled congregation. One may be tempted to reach for more power when one feels threatened and the power one is working with is not felt to be adequate. I have worked with a wide variety of denominational church leaders. Some assume that their title or office adds to their ability to affect change and maintain peace. They live an illusion. My experience leads me to insist that a clerical collar or the size of your pectoral cross make little difference when a congregation is in conflict and you are there to adjudicate a controverted situation and to lead people toward peace and healing.

Here is what makes a difference: (1) earning people's trust over an extended period of time; (2) listening patiently; (3) being fair with all parties in a dispute; and most important, (4) being clearly a witness to the gospel, that we all fall under God's judgment, that the love of God and the forgiveness of sins alone call us together and enable reconciliation. The gospel must permeate everything we do, churchwide and in our local congregations. Will bishops have more power, or a new and different power, following the laying on of hands through the historic episcopate? While I don't think so, I realize there are others who feel differently. Let's talk. Let's listen.

Let's work more from the bottom up, while we work at the top. The Episcopal-Lutheran Dialogue began thirty years ago. From the initial session, its personnel on both sides have been theologians of distinction and persons of integrity. They regularly reported their progress. Ultimately, they came to a clear and certain conviction: there is nothing that keeps our churches from declaring a unity in mission and ministry. Unfortunately, most of us in the church only brushed the surface of their reports. When the CCM proposal was announced, again most of us read the basic statements and concluded, given the competence and integrity of those advocating the Agreement, that all was well. Even in the two years between the first consideration and the decision in 1999, the debate was minimal; the issues were not focused for critical review in our congregations; thus, few could ask the crucial questions. Controversy at its best leads us to sharpen the issues, compels us to pursue new studies, and hopefully deepens our convictions and ultimately our unity.

The Sunday after the Denver decision was reported in the national press, the president of the congregation were I was serving as an interim pastor asked, "What do we have to believe differently now that we are united with the Episcopalians?" While she was serious, she also was confident that the decision would not call for any change in our parish or in her behavior. She was not disturbed.

There is a difference when a decision is made from above that mandates a personal behavioral change below, as in the prescription for the laying on of hands by an Episcopalian bishop in future consecrations or installations of Lutheran bishops. Now suddenly our cultural antipathy to authority

is aroused and discomfort sets in, especially if we have not taken the time to explore the issues or simply find it all very confusing and conflicting.

I recall the excitement that went through many Lutheran parishes in the 1960s as they began living room dialogues with Roman Catholics. People found a deeper understanding of their own heritage as they came to know their Roman Catholic neighbors better and learned what they held in common and what the differences were. Unfortunately, no mutual conversations between Episcopalians and Lutherans were recommended at the local level, with laity and pastors present, relative to the proposed Concordat, later the CCM. There were of course Episcopal-Lutheran dialogue groups in many synods, but those positions tended to be filled by persons already committed to a successful conclusion. Did they ever ask for open discussion on the hard questions which have now surfaced?

In anticipation of the political process necessary to achieve an agreement that would energize the church rather than divide it, we ought to encourage open and frank exchange at all levels early in the process. Some would say that is a sure way to lose any possible ecumenical agreement. Then again, it may be the way for leadership and for all of us to demonstrate trust of the Holy Spirit, leading the people of God to exercise our calling and to do so with diligence and honor. We cannot turn the clock back. Yet, now may be a time to learn from the present, pointing to what we need to practice in the future: engaging crucial issues openly and early at all levels, even as we work at the top.

The historic episcopate would appear to have us in a nonresolvable conflict. Those among us who know the Episcopal Church realize and insist there is no possibility of "full communion" without acceptance of the historic episcopate. Having approved "full communion" with the Reformed, it would be a tragic historic blunder for the ELCA not to proceed with an acceptance of that which other bodies of our Lutheran Church already practice.

Yet, we are confronted with other voices, arguing just as forcefully that they cannot agree to the historic episcopate on Confessional grounds. Are we in an irreconcilable positions? While we offer prayers for the unity of the church as we look to the Episcopalians, we ought just as fervently to offer prayers for the unity of our own church and for the divine wisdom to break through what appears to be an impasse

I still stand with the Denver decision. But I am distressed—not that there is disagreement, even intense disagreement in some circles, but that many of us on both sides are handling our differences poorly. Can we make this an opportunity for growth in mutual understanding, a time to practice respect even for those with whom we disagree? Can the ELCA and its factions teach and lead, modeling for our congregations the engaging of issues with honor?

Controversy at its best leads us to sharpen the issues, compels us to pursue new studies, and hopefully deepens our convictions and ultimately our unity.

Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

A Position Paper of the Faculty of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary[1]

I. Spirituality in light of the Lutheran Confessions

1. "Spirituality" has many meanings in contemporary culture, not all of them theologically acceptable. In this paper, spirituality will be taken to mean intentional practice of the Christian faith, both corporate and individual, insofar as it seeks to build up Christian identity and nurture life in the Spirit in the multiple dimensions of personal existence.

2. The Lutheran Confessions make room for such intentional spirituality when they speak of a certain "cooperation" with the Holy Spirit on the part of the believer: "As soon as the Holy Spirit has begun this work of rebirth and renewal in us through word and sacrament, it is certain that by the power of the Holy Spirit we can and must cooperate, though still in great weakness. Yet this does not originate in our carnal, natural powers, but in the new powers and gifts which the Holy Spirit has initiated in us in conversion . . ." (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art II, par 65).

3. The Formula warns us that we must never regard our cooperation as parallel and equal to the operation of the Spirit, "like two horses pulling the same wagon" (ibid., par 66). Rather, our "cooperation" is itself the Spirit's gift, according to the Pauline rule: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor 4:7; cf. ibid., par 35).

4. According to Lutheran confessional teaching, the work of the Spirit which grants faith inescapably transforms us (cf. ibid, par 70; Apology, Art IV, par 64). At the same time, the changes that occur in our lives by the power of the Spirit never become the basis for our confidence in God's favor and love: "renewal in faith, hope, and love is always dependent on God's unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification about which one could boast before God" (Joint Declaration on Justification, par 27). Our confidence before God is always founded exclusively on God's free mercy embodied in Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the power of the Spirit through word and sacrament.

5. Within this framework, the Lutheran Confessions affirm the dramatic and dynamic character of Christian life as attested in Holy Scripture: "Because in this life we receive only the first-fruits of the Spirit, and new birth is not completed but only begun

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in us, the struggle and conflict of the flesh against the Spirit continue even in elect and truly reborn persons. Indeed, not only is there a great difference to be discerned amongst Christians, so that one is weak and another strong in the Spirit, but individual Christians discover in their own lives that they are at one time at peace in the Spirit and at another fearful and shaken, at one time passionate in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art II, par 67). In the midst of this struggle, believers are called to "abide in Christ" in order to "bear much fruit" (Jn 15:4–8), to "be watchful and pray" (Lk 21:26), to avoid "conformity to this world" while being "transformed by the renewing of the mind" (Rom 12:2–3), to "walk by the Spirit" while refusing to "gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16), to "put away your former way of life, the old self," and to "clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22). "Spirituality" is one name for the struggle of believers to respond to such admonitions.

6. Lutheran tradition understands "spiritual life" as faith itself, alive in adoration and praise, and holding fast in daily conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil: "Although faith fully possesses Christ and all his riches, yet it must be continually kept in motion and exercised, so that it may have assurance, and firmly retain its treasures. There is a difference between having a thing and firmly keeping hold of it, between a strong and a weak faith. . . . Where faith is not continually kept in motion and exercised, it weakens and decreases. . . . Therefore you should not imagine that it is enough if you have commenced to believe; but you must diligently watch that your faith continue firm, or it will vanish; you are to see how you may retain this treasure you have embraced; for Satan concentrates all his skill and strength on how to tear it out of your heart. Therefore the growth of your faith is truly as necessary as its beginning, and indeed more so; but all is the work of God" (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. J. N. Lenker, vol. V, 254–256).

7. Operating within this confessional and theological framework, Lutherans participate in the spiritual tradition of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, receiving and synthesizing that great tradition in a theologically principled way. We have no Lutheran resources in spirituality which are not themselves already involved with wider Christian traditions of belief and practice. Luther's own "spiritual theology"—his pastoral theology of Christian existence—drew heavily on patristic and medieval pastoral and monastic resources. The great Lutheran spiritual writers of the age of Pietism and Orthodoxy were likewise remarkably ecumenical, both in their openness to the Christian past and in their willingness to learn across confessional dividing-lines. Today also Lutheran spirituality is an essentially ecumenical endeavor. Our task is to engage and integrate the classical Christian tradition and the best contemporary resources in a theologically and pastorally responsible fashion.

II. Christian spirituality: ecumenical affirmations

1. With the ecumenical tradition, we affirm the anthropology of the unquiet heart, summed up in Augustine's well-known prayer: "You have made us for Yourself, and our heart finds no rest until it rests in You" (*Confessions* I, 1). What is most fundamental about human persons is their need and desire for God.

2. With the tradition, we affirm the reality of original sin: the powerful energy

of human need and desire, meant to bind us to God, has been diverted from its true object. Moreover, we put our trust not in the goodness of God who "satisfies the desire of every living thing" (Ps 145:16), but in our own power: this is the pride whose flip-side is despair. Thus we lust for things that will kill us; we come into greedy conflict with one another; we deny our own dignity; and we offend God, whose love is spurned by our sin. This is the shared plight of the whole human family; we are all born into it, and we are deformed and limited by it in many diverse ways.

3. With the whole church we confess that God has acted in Jesus Christ to free us from the wrong and misery of sin. In Christ crucified and risen we are received into God's favor, we are crowned with undeserved honor and dignity as God's children, and we receive the Holy Spirit who struggles with our desires and teaches us to fear, love, and trust God. All Christian spirituality is a spirituality of faith, hope, and love, the Spirit-wrought human acts and affects by which we respond to God's gift and cling to Christ day by day.

4. With the great tradition, we affirm that true Christian spirituality is *ecclesial* spirituality: we find Christ in the assembly of God's people gathered around word and sacrament (the *congregatio sanctorum*: Augsburg Confession, art 7). The Spirit brings us to Christ by bringing us to the church: "He leads us first into His holy assembly, and lays us on the bosom of the church, and in this way He preaches to us and brings us to Christ" (Large Catechism, Creed, Art 3, par 37). Relationship with Christ is thus personal but not private: it binds us to fellowship with Christ's body and to a concrete ecclesial way of life.

5. At the heart of the new life of God's people is the privilege and vocation of prayer. This prayer is both corporate and individual, ordered and spontaneous, and encompasses praise and thanksgiving, confession and intercession. God mercifully hears the cries of all creatures, yet to pray "in the name of Jesus" (Jn 16:24) and to cry out "Abba, Father" through the gift of Christ's Spirit (Gal 4:6) is the special dignity of the baptized. Faith in God's mercy takes form as prayer: "What is such faith, if not sheer prayer?" (Luther, Sermons, V, 70). Prayer is the heart of Christian life, the primary enactment of faith, and the first and most distinctive service which Christians owe the world.

6. As sinners, we must *learn* the art of prayer from Holy Scripture, the corporate worship of the church, and the example of the saints who have gone before us. With the ecumenical tradition, we recognize that a special role is played in this learning by the Psalms of Israel, and the prayers and canticles of the New Testament, and especially the Prayer which Jesus taught his disciples.

7. With the great tradition, we refuse to isolate Christian prayer as a "religious" act from human life in the social world. Prayer is confidence and hope in God set against the distortion of life by sin: it thus goes together with self-discipline and availability to the need of the neighbor. Self-discipline means resisting the domination of one's life by distorted need and futile desire, in confidence in God as our true Good; availability to the neighbor's need is likewise rooted in confidence in God's abundance, in light of which we need not regard others as threatening competitors for scarce resources. In both these ways, faith enacted in prayer has public, social consequences.

8. We share with the tradition a twofold realism: realism about self that knows the ambiguity of all our virtues and achievements, and realism about God's bountiful goodness that hopes for great things despite

self. Christian spirituality knows that we never outgrow utter dependence on sheer mercy; it knows also that because of that mercy, humility is not incompatible with extravagant hope.

9. Most deeply, Christian spirituality is participation in the life of the Triune God. United with Christ by the Spirit through faith in the promise, we seek to be formed in Christ's image and to glorify the Father with him, in every dimension of our personal existence: in the shaping of our character, in the inward struggle with secret thoughts and desires, and in our outward behavior in the public world. Christian spirituality is thus a sign of the Kingdom of God, of the life of the age to come when "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

III. The shape of spiritual formation

1. The theme of "formation" is deeply rooted in the New Testament witness, perhaps especially in Paul. He addresses the Galatians as "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19), and exhorts the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2). Christian formation is both personal and corporate, involving our inmost heart, our outward behavior, and the way we live together. Formation is the work of the Spirit who brings us to Christ and joins our lives to his, so that in struggle and newness of life we bear the image of the crucified and risen Lord and make him known to the world.

2. Formation implies discipline; to be "formed" is to undergo a shaping and ordering of life that does not leave all options open. The theme of discipline sometimes evokes fear of legalism and spiritual tyranny among Lutherans, yet if we cannot speak of discipline, we have no protection against rank consumerism. Christian spirituality is not a search for new gratifications for the "fat relentless ego" (Iris Murdoch), but *metanoia* and *metamorphosis* (cf. Mk 1:15; Rom 12:2), death and resurrection.

3. We believe that Lutheran teaching about the "external" or "bodily" word makes an ecumenically relevant contribution to this theme (Augsburg Confession, art V; Smalcald Articles, III, art 8, par 3-13). Christian spiritual formation is essentially sacramental: it is intentional engagement with what Luther loved to call the "bodily word," the array of outward words and signs—rituals, discourse, persons, artifacts, and institutions—through which the Holy Spirit makes Christ known in and through the church.

4. The bodily word is discipline just because it is public and external: it is out there in the world, obviously and tangibly other than the self. Spiritual formation is being formed by a word encountered in the public, bodily world out beyond the self. The public, ritual character of preaching and sacrament; the material elements of water, bread, and wine; the words, gestures, and presence of the pastor pronouncing absolution; the textual givenness of Holy Scripture; the witness of believers different from us in time, culture, and social position; and the corporate objectivity of liturgical form, all represent different forms of this bodily "otherness" with which God's word comes to us. We are disciplined away from idolatry, from manufacturing a God whose function is to gratify the ego, by this public, bodily *concreteness* of Christ's presence *pro nobis* in word and sacrament.

5. Within this sacramental context, Christian spirituality must be understood as baptismal struggle and hope. Baptism, our foundational meeting with the bodily word of Christ, initiates a protracted conflict over

the "formation" of our lives. To "return to Baptism" in daily remembrance is to return to this struggle, for Baptism's "work and power are nothing other than the slaying of the old Adam and then the resurrection of the new human being, both of which go on in us our whole life long" (Large Catechism, Baptism, par 65). This daily return to Baptism receives a special concretion in Individual Confession and Absolution, which is therefore of great importance for spiritual formation in the church.

6. The baptismal struggle goes on in every dimension of our existence: in public, as we strive to live as God's children in human societies and cultures (and even church bodies!) whose life is distorted by sin (the world); in our own hearts, as we struggle with wrong desire and distorted need (the flesh); and in our fundamental orientation to reality, as we cling to the truth of the gospel against the power of deception (the devil). Against these foes, Baptism is the standing promise that, in the mercy of God, we shall bear the form of the crucified and risen Christ.

7. We share with the ecumenical tradition a sense of the normative shape of Christian formation. The new humanity is formed in us in the midst of the baptismal conflict through the interaction of word and prayer, as God draws near through word and sign, and we respond by giving thanks and asking for what we need. Spiritual formation is intentional entry into this formative dialogue, so that, in Luther's words, "our dear Lord Himself may speak to us through His holy Word and we respond to Him through prayer and praise" (*Luther's Works* 51, 333).

8. The primary locus of such formation is common worship, especially the communal celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In the full service of Holy Communion, in which the Proclamation of the Word and the Prayer of the Church are juxtaposed with the Great Thanksgiving and the Communion of the Faithful, the dramatic interplay of divine generosity and human participation is enacted in all its complexity with unsurpassable depth and power.

9. The pattern of Eucharistic worship is extended into daily life in the interplay of word and prayer, in the "feeding" and "chewing" on the word of God (*lectio divina*) which evoke and sustain prayer. As Augustine put it, "When you read, God is speaking to you; when you pray, you are speaking to God" (PL 37:1086). This interplay of word and prayer, *meditatio* and *oratio*, constitutes the normative pattern of Christian spiritual practice in the ecumenical tradition. We believe that there are solid theological reasons for the pervasiveness of this pattern, set forth in our Lutheran tradition in the doctrine of the bodily word.

10. This norm permits great diversity: the interplay of word and prayer can be embodied in multiple and various concrete forms of practice. Lutherans are not restricted to modes of practice already familiar in Lutheran circles; in spirituality, as in doctrine and worship, the Lutheran Church "claims as its rightful inheritance all that is truly ecumenical in the Church of every age and every land" (*Service Book and Hymnal*, "Preface," vi). Contemporary efforts to recover the Daily Office and the ancient practice of *lectio divina* are especially congruent with basic Lutheran commitments.

11. Inevitably, an individual's spiritual discipline will reflect individual needs, dispositions, and gifts. But every Christian's personal discipline should be founded on the remembrance of Baptism, centered in Eucharistic worship, and reflect the normative pattern of Christian formation. That is, it should involve daily engagement with God's word as an "external word" concretely other than the self, and it should involve the practice of prayer as thanksgiv-

ing, and praise, confession and intercession.

12. Christians should beware of making or heeding exaggerated, sectarian claims for particular forms of spiritual practice or particular types of spiritual experience. Only word and sacrament and the pattern they imply are for everyone: they give us a sufficient focus for a shared identity and a normative framework within which diversity can be reconciled and celebrated.

13. As faculty in a seminary of the church, we are especially conscious of the importance of intentional spiritual formation for pastoral ministry, the diaconate, and other forms of church leadership. Seminary students must receive the encouragement, urging, and instruction they need in order to find a stable and enlivening pattern of spiritual practice capable of sustaining them over the long haul in life and ministry. Leaders in the church must also be encouraged to seek forms of spiritual practice that place them at the *center* of the Christian tradition which they are to represent and interpret.

IV. Spiritual direction as gospel ministry

1. The guidance and help of a spiritual director may be one way in which Christians encounter "the word out beyond the self." We welcome the development of ministries of spiritual direction in our church; however, spiritual direction needs to be defined and shaped in a theological context. A spiritual director is a Christian believer, ordained or not, who is called by God and the church to offer guidance and help to fellow-believers through the embodiment of God's word in close pastoral relationships of a special kind.

2. Spiritual direction thus understood is a form of gospel ministry: a spiritual director is neither one who takes power over the lives of other Christians, nor merely a "facilitator" or therapist; rather, a spiritual director is one called to accompany fellow-believers on the way of discipleship as a witness and speaker of the word of Christ.

3. Like all gospel ministry, authentic spiritual direction is *ecclesial* ministry. Those who believe themselves called to this ministry should seek acknowledgment and confirmation of their call by the pastors and people of the church. Not every ordained person has the gifts for this ministry, so this rule applies also for the ordained. Such acknowledgment might take many forms, and might often be informal rather than institutionally formalized, but it should be such that a spiritual director can say in good conscience that his or her ministry is *recognized by the Christian community.*

4. Because spiritual direction is gospel ministry, spiritual directors need theological training. Because spiritual direction is ecclesial ministry, spiritual directors need to study the spiritual and pastoral traditions of the ecumenical church. Such formation can take place in many different settings; seminary study may be valuable for many, but need not be the only model. Careful thought and creative improvisation are needed to make widely available the theological formation that spiritual directors need.

5. Because spiritual direction is not ultimately a matter of technical expertise, but gospel witness on the part of sinful, frail, tempted believers, spiritual directors need spiritual direction. All those who engage in the ministry of spiritual direction should themselves receive direction, as well as the support and accountability of peer supervision, and should take part in Individual Confession and Absolution on a regular basis with a competent and trusted confessor.

Discussion about Spirituality

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"Spirituality and Spiritual Formation," a position paper adopted by the faculty of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in 1998, is an important document. The faculty of Southern Seminary is to be commended for making such a substantive and constructive contribution to Lutheran reflection on these topics. Since the position paper was adopted in part as a "theologically responsible contribution to ongoing discussion within the wider church," I would like to respond to it. I agree with nearly everything in the document, but there are three points on which I would suggest further conversation.

1. Definition of spirituality. The authors of the position paper recognize that "spirituality" is used in various ways, so they wisely define their usage. "In this paper, 'spirituality' will be taken to mean intentional practice of the Christian faith, both corporate and individual, insofar as it seeks to build up Christian identity and nurture 'life in the Spirit' in the multiple dimensions of personal existence" (Part I, paragraph 1). Here spirituality seems to be understood as Christian spiritual practice or one's use of Christian spiritual disciplines. This meaning is reinforced when the position paper goes on to say, "We have no Lutheran resources in spirituality which are not themselves already involved with wider Christian traditions of belief and practice" (I, 7). That is, unlike the Jesuits with their Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, Lutherans have no spiritual practice distinctive to them.

I admit that spirituality as spiritual practice is the most common way I hear Lutheran pastors employ the term, so this usage is readily understood in their circles. However, this interpretation of spirituality is more narrow than the way many Christians and many scholars use it. For instance, Sandra Schneiders, a leader in the study of Christian spirituality, defines Christian spirituality as the experience of lived Christian faith as it transforms its subject toward fullness of life in Christ within the Christian community of faith.[1] For Schneiders spirituality focuses primarily on the experience of Christian faith and secondarily on various practices associated with it in a Christian community.

I define spirituality as faith plus a path. That is, spirituality is particular, and its particularity includes both a specific faith and certain practices of nurturing and expressing that faith. Lutheran spirituality, then, refers to Christian faith shaped by the Lutheran tradition of theology, nurtured centrally by word and sacraments in Lutheran Christian community, and expressed in Christian vocation. In contrast, the definition used by the position paper

[1] Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 (Spring, 1998): 1, 3.

appears to identify spirituality only with certain practices, with what I call a path; then it uses "spiritual life" as a synonym for faith (I, 6).

As Bernard McGinn has argued, there is no "correct" definition of spirituality.[2] The position paper does well to lay out its definition, and it is one readily understood by many Lutherans. That is a strength. However, I see two liabilities. This narrower definition makes it difficult to connect the discussion of spirituality among Lutherans with wider discussions among Christians. A second weakness is related, namely, that by the Southern Seminary understanding there would not seem to be anything we should call "Lutheran spirituality." There would only be Lutheran principles for engaging and integrating the ecumenical resources of spirituality. That seems odd, when much of the broader literature refers to such particular Christian spiritualities as Benedictine, Quaker, Celtic, Lutheran, and so forth.

2. The understanding of prayer. In the several places where the paper speaks of prayer, it explains prayer as *oratio*, speaking to God, which is expressed as thanksgiving, praise, confession, and intercession. The position paper rightly emphasizes that prayer/oratio is evoked and sustained by *meditatio*, meditation on the word of God, and in this context the document mentions *lectio divina*. This conception of prayer as oratio is considerably more narrow than how prayer is frequently conceived in the great, ecumenical tradition with which the position paper says Lutherans are identified. Frequently, prayer is understood as involving both meditatio and oratio, so that prayer is a dialogue or conversation. Furthermore, there are many instances in the ecumenical tradition of a contemplative dimension to prayer. This dimension is not even mentioned in the position paper. Now,

there is good reason for us Lutherans to be discriminating about the manner in which contemplative prayer has been talked about and practiced in Christianity, yet I question whether it is good to totally ignore it. The heart of Christian contemplative prayer is awareness of the presence of God, which is grounded in and nurtured by the interplay of oratio and meditatio. In fact, explanations of *lectio divina* usually include some discussion of *contemplatio*. Omitting it is serious, for a number of Christians—Lutherans included—experience and value this contemplative dimension of prayer.

3. How prescriptive should we be? My question concerns this statement, "But every Christian's personal discipline should be founded on the remembrance of Baptism, centered in Eucharistic worship, and reflect the normative pattern of Christian formation. That is, it should involve daily engagement with God's word as an 'external word' concretely other than the self, and it should involve the practice of prayer as thanksgiving, and praise, confession and

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[2] Bernard McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," *The Cresset 56* (June, 1993): 19.

intercession" (III, 11). I heartily agree that while individual spiritual discipline will vary, regular engagement with word and sacrament as God's external address to the self is the model and pattern for everyone. My concern focuses on the first statement, "Every Christian's personal discipline should be founded on the remembrance of Baptism." It all depends on what is meant by remembrance of baptism. If it means, as III, 5 might suggest, a living out of the underlying reality of baptism as dying and rising with Christ, then all is well. However, if remembrance of baptism must include some conscious, explicit thought about baptism, then I am more dubious about saying this should be a part of every Christian's personal discipline.

Here my role as a theologian is in some tension with my limited experience as a spiritual director. A theologian attempts to say what sound theology teaches, and in that role I encourage explicit remembrance of baptism as a valuable practice. My limited experience as a spiritual director tells me, though, that while growth in Christ does indeed have a crucifixion/resurrection shape, a person may experience that movement without mentally linking it with baptism. I think of a 43-year-old devout Christian man dying from cancer. He certainly knew first hand both the crucifixion of leaving behind his beloved 6-year-old daughter and wife and the resurrection of an ever deepening trust in God's love in Christ, yet the word baptism never entered our conversations. Perhaps I was remiss not to introduce that connection, but I think not. In many situations it is surely fitting for a spiritual director or pastor to recommend some discipline of explicitly remembering baptism. My question is, How prescriptive should we be? The difference is slight between saying 'you are *encouraged* to follow a spiritual practice' or 'you *should* follow it.' Yet pastorally the difference is not insignificant.

This issue relates also to the definition of spirituality. If spirituality is equated with practicing spiritual disciplines, then the pastor or spiritual director should be sure to stress explicit consciousness of baptism. But if spirituality includes the experience of lived Christian faith, then for the pastor or spiritual director the practice of explicitly remembering baptism takes second place to the underlying experiential reality of dying and rising with Christ.

The fact that I raise these three questions should not overshadow my fundamental agreement with the position paper and my admiration for and gratitude to the faculty of Southern Seminary for their important contribution.

A Response to Bradley Hanson

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It is gratifying to see how much consensus you and I already have. The tensions and disagreements you identify are located within a broad and substantive agreement, which suggests that our faculty statement may largely succeed in one of its purposes, to identify the "center" on this issue for Lutherans. Some of your concerns may only reflect inevitable differences of approach and intellectual style; on one point I think you may have just read us wrong; at a few places there are larger issues of substance that should at least be explored, though I am by no means assuming that even here there are large *disagreements* of substance.

In this response to your remarks, I shall be walking a narrow line, since I am both chief drafter of the position paper and a fellow-theologian very interested in discussing these matters with you. Naturally many formulations in the position paper have resonances in my own thinking which aren't part of what my colleagues were endorsing when they adopted it. In what follows, I shall try to make clear though informal distinctions between those places where I represent the faculty's intentions in receiving and adopting the paper, and those where I speak on my own behalf.

Definition of spirituality

The faculty discussed the matter of broad and narrow definitions of spirituality, and concluded that the definition employed was clearly delineated and useful for our purposes, and that corporately we need claim no more for it than that.

My own tendency is to think that narrow definitions are usually more helpful than broad ones: the point of "defining" is *de-finire*, marking off phenomena so that we can get some kind of reflective purchase on them. A broad definition like that you cite from Schneiders seems to me to give one the satisfaction of having left nothing out, but one can at the same time do less with it. It makes "spirituality" a synonym for "Christian existence" or "life in the Spirit" (or the Formula of Concord's "spiritual life"), and I am not sure we really need another synonym for that. On the other hand, we *do* need a name for the whole dimension of intentional practice; "piety" and *praxis pietatis* is by now irretrievable.

There are some other more arguable reasons that made the narrow definition seem advisable to me. I think that spiritual practice is something Lutherans need rather desperately to bring into focus. As I read

our recent history, the collapse of the old pietist disciplines at about mid-century was followed by the influence of existentialist and secular theologies which led many Lutheran pastors and leaders to suppose that we were better off *without* spiritual practice, which they equated with inauthenticity and works-righteousness. The outcome has been, as far as I can see, forgetfulness not only of spiritual formation but of the very idea that congregations might be formative communities. This may be why Lutheran pastors tend to define "spirituality" as our paper does: they are identifying the point at which they sense that they and their congregations are in trouble. Given that there is no "correct" definition of spirituality, this seems to me the most *useful* deployment of the term for Lutherans right now.

Related to this is another point: we assumed that our statement had to be aimed not only at other Lutherans who are already concerned about spirituality and spiritual formation, but also at the many Lutherans who are deeply suspicious of the whole idea, those who regard "*We don't have to do anything!*" as the whole gospel and therefore equate spiritual practice with legalism. It seemed to us that we had to make a case for the *legitimacy* of taking spiritual practice seriously on confessional grounds; and that also influenced the way in which we deployed the term "spirituality."

I must admit that I don't see why the deliberate and explicit choice to use the term "spirituality" to refer to practice rather than the whole reality of life in the Spirit should inhibit Lutheran interaction with non-Lutheran thinking. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox, and Reformed and Wesleyan Protestants do not use the term in a uniform way either, and therefore we are going to have to be attentive to different ‑ges and do some translating no matter how we choose to define the term. Maybe this seems less problematic to me as an ecumenist accustomed to the constant negotiation of diversity in the deployment of basic theological categories; the uses of "spirituality" are certainly less complex than the diversity of Christian talk of "grace" or "sacrament" or "church"!

Finally, on this point, and now speaking only for myself, I have severe difficulties with the dichotomy you ascribe to Schneiders, in which "the experience of Christian faith" is rather sharply distinguished from Christian practice, with the latter entering the picture only in a secondary capacity. I don't see Christian practice as secondary to a logically (perhaps even temporally?) prior "experience of faith" in this way; I am much happier to speak of the "experience of faith" as the experience precisely *of* a specific kind of practice, something like the "full, conscious, and active participation" in Christian practice of which Vatican II's *Constitution on the Liturgy* speaks.

Of course it is crucial here that the central practices of Christianity are all practices of *gospel-speaking* which present us with Jesus Christ. The experience of faith, I would want to say, is centrally the experience of *getting the point* of what is said about Christ and promised in his name in the communication-practice of the *ekklesia*.

This seems to me the implication of Luther's pneumatology, in which the Spirit "brings us to the Lord Christ to receive the treasure" by involving us in the economy of communal communication-practice which Luther calls "the external word" (cf. *Large Catechism*, Creed, Third Article; *Smalcald Articles*, "On Penitence"). It also seems to me to make better sense of Scripture, for which, as Bonhoeffer pointed out in *The Cost of Discipleship*, faith is inseparable from bodily following of the bodily Jesus,

and in which Paul can bracket "believing with the heart" with "confessing with the mouth" and "calling on the name of the Lord" (Romans 10) without any hint that somehow the former is the real act of faith of which the latter are only secondary expressions.

Obviously also there are a whole host of issues here located along the modern/postmodern divide, questions about the nature and status of the inner and the outer, the private and the public, subjectivity and body. Divisions of the territory like Schneiders' seem to me to assume a stable modernist sense of a private "inner self" whose distinction from and relation to the "outer" realm of public, bodily practice is essentially unproblematic. I think that there always were high theological and spiritual costs to this sort of modernism, and I also find it very difficult to defend in the contemporary setting.

On the other hand, I am not inclined to make an absolutely divisive issue of this: there were also always ways of compensating, theologically and spiritually, for the costs of the modernist picture, and I don't want to grant any kind of normative theological authority to the postmodernist philosophical atmosphere. It's just that, in my judgment, holding on to that kind of picture without giving into its drift towards "angelism" and *Schwärmerei*, on the one hand, and resisting what seem to me the very cogent philosophical objections to it, on the other, has gotten to be more trouble than it is worth.

The question of "Lutheran" spirituality

This is an interesting issue. On one point I think that you have simply misread our document. To say, as we do, that "we have no Lutheran resources in spirituality which are not themselves already involved with wider Christian traditions of belief and practice" is not the same as saying that "Lutherans have no spiritual practice distinctive to them." The point would rather be that even the distinctive Lutheran forms of spiritual practice are "already involved with wider Christian traditions of belief and practice" and can only be understood in terms of that involvement. A good example would be meditation on the Catechism, which is certainly a distinctively Lutheran practice. Yet the Catechism is at its heart a set of shared Christian texts, and the practice of meditation itself Luther inherited from the ancient church and indeed from Israel through the medieval monastic tradition.

As I understood our insistence on the ecumenicity of Lutheran spirituality, we wanted to guard against the notion of Lutheranism as a comprehensive life-form, irreducibly different from any other form of Christian faith and practice, as if there is a "distinctively Lutheran" way to do everything and "Lutheran identity" is threatened by the introduction of "alien" practice. By referring to the Preface to the *Service Book and Hymnal*, which I absorbed in childhood, I was trying to disarm the sort of Lutheran tribalism that would be immediately suspicious of our drawing on Roman Catholic or Episcopal resources, or appealing to pre-Reformation texts and traditions. I do not suppose that you suffer from this disease, but surely you know that it exists.

I myself want to think of Lutheranism as *already* united to other Christian traditions by the common reception of fundamental elements of Christian identity: Baptism, the Supper, the Scriptures, the faith of the ancient Creeds, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer—in short, the very elements which the Catechisms place at the heart of *Lutheran* identity! Distinctive Lutheran doctrinal commitments

do not add Lutheran peculiarities to this ecumenical core but claim to make explicit what is implicit in its depth-logic. I think we need to take seriously the repeated protestations of the Reformers that they are not pushing a new discovery of Luther's but standing by the implications of the core practice and testimony of historic Christianity. Thus Melanchthon in the *Apology*: ". . . . the whole Church confesses that eternal life comes through mercy" (*The Book of Concord*, 157). And Luther:

> It is nothing new which we teach; old things, and things which were from the beginning, are what we have taught, what we inculcate and establish. And would that we were really able to inculcate and establish them, that we might possess them, thoroughly meditated, not only in our mouths but in the depths of our hearts, and be able to use them especially in the agony of death.[1]

Perhaps you will forgive me for quoting myself, from some material I use with students:

> Indeed, if the Reformation account of justification is as important and profoundly implicated in the elementary deep-structures of the faith as Protestants have claimed, we ought to be able to assume that *all* Christians who take seriously the Trinitarian-Christological heart of the faith will tend to agree *practically* with the Reformers, *even when they think they disagree*. The task of the theology of justification is not to celebrate some idiosyncratic Lutheran or Protestant badge of identity, but to discern and set forth the deep inner bonds between the concerns and convictions of the western Reformers and the shared faith of the whole Church, especially its Trinitarian and Christological center.

I would want to say the same thing with regard to traditions of practice; indeed, at the heart of our faculty paper is the claim that the basic account of the shape of Christian formation in the Christian tradition, broadly construed, is just what Lutheran theology would prescribe. At this point, being ecumenical and being Lutheran coincide, precisely because Lutheran teaching is not a teaching about being Lutheran but a teaching about being Christian, a disclosure of the deep logic of the common Christian tradition.

Probably here we could use some sorting out of different senses of "being Lutheran." In one sense, "Lutheranism" is a dogmatic identity—that is, it means accepting certain doctrinal "rules of the game" and advocating them ecumenically. In another sense, "Lutheranism" is a theological tradition in a broader sense involving not only doctrinal rules but a set of neuralgic problems. So Lutheran theologians are the ones who think the law-gospel distinction is an *important* issue. I take it that when I promised to abide by the Confessions at my installation here at LTSS, I promised to be a "Lutheran theologian" in both these senses: to submit to the rules of the game set forth in the Confessions but also to think theologically along with those texts and take seriously the problems identified as crucial in them.

In another sense, though, "Lutheran" defines more broadly the traditional style and ways of the Christian communities which have, since the Reformation, housed and officially professed "Lutheranism" as dogma and theological tradition. Practices and beliefs and patterns of experience in *this* sense are obviously related rather complexly to what is "Lutheran" in those two senses. If we take "Lutheran" to mean "characteristic of the communities mentioned," then we might have to say, accord-

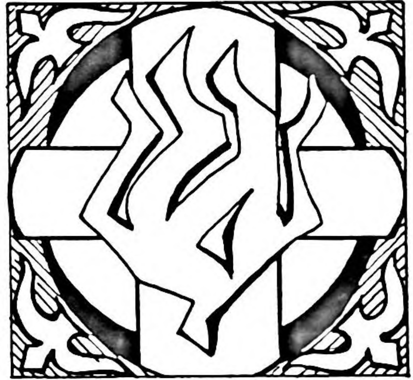
[1] *WA* 40/1:93–94.

ing to some studies of Lutheran opinion, that it is "Lutheran" to believe that we go to heaven by keeping the Ten Commandments and living a good life!

It is also true that much of what is characteristically Lutheran in this sense is not *distinctively* Lutheran, does not distinguish Lutherans from other Christians. For example, it is characteristic, but not distinctive, of Lutherans to worship following the traditional *ordo* of the Mass in the Western church. One danger of focusing on that which is distinctively Lutheran is that we may then underestimate the importance of beliefs and practices which are not distinctive but shared with other Christians, but which have nonetheless been characteristic and in some cases deeply formative of historic Lutheran communities.

Finally, it is the case that what is Lutheran in this sense is also going to be closely tied to culture and ethnicity as well as doctrinal-theological identity. We may ask what is Lutheran about the style and ways of Lutheran congregations in Tanzania or in the Batak Church; obviously much that seems "distinctively Lutheran" if one is only comparing European Lutherans with other European Christians is going to be quite different there.

Moreover there is a problem equating "Lutheran spirituality" with, say, Benedictine or Jesuit spirituality precisely because "Lutheran" is, in the divided church, an *ecclesial* label and so has special overtones of normativity. When Catholics talk of Benedictine and Jesuit spiritualities, the context is an assumption that both parties share the same faith. If you adopt a Benedictine spirituality, everyone knows that you are not calling the Catholic legitimacy of the Jesuits into question, but if you speak of "Lutheran spirituality" it is very difficult to avoid the implication that you are presenting some paradigm of spiritual experi-



ence (broad definition) or practice (narrow definition) as required for "real Lutherans."

What then is the relation between Lutheran doctrine and Lutheran spirituality? Is Lutheran spirituality one that can be extrapolated deductively from the doctrine of justification? Is it one that just does not contradict the doctrine of justification? Or is it something in between? Is there only *one* spirituality that could be positively related to Lutheran doctrines, or are there many? And if one speaks of Lutheran spirituality, what does that imply about the relation of other spiritualities to Lutheran doctrine? Does it imply, for example, that Benedictine spirituality is contrary to Lutheran doctrine and therefore un-Lutheran?

Even if one takes the notion of Lutheran spirituality as simply descriptive of a *Gestalt* of spiritual life characteristic of Lutherans, I think that there are difficulties. Is Lutheran spirituality a kind of reproduction in others of Luther's so-called "discovery of the gospel"? Is it Gerhard's piety or Arndt's or Francke's or Loehe's or Grundtvig's, or is it the piety of an up-country village congregation in the Tanzanian Church? I am not persuaded that even historically it is easy to talk about a single "Lutheran"

If one speaks of Lutheran spirituality, what does that imply about the relation of other spiritualities to Lutheran doctrine?

Gestalt in either the broad or the narrower sense of "spirituality."

It is not, to be sure, that I think there is *nothing* that binds together Gerhard and Arndt and Francke and Loehe and Grundtvig and the Tanzanian Lutherans. But my guess is that very little of what binds them together is *distinctively* Lutheran. My guess is that we would find them bound together by the presence in their lives of the same scriptural texts and the same sacramental rites, both embedded and embraced in the patterns of the Western liturgy, adapted to be sure in very different ways to local circumstances, and focused in the *Hauptstücke* of the Catechism. If there is a distinctively Lutheran bond among them I would bet it would turn out to be the *Small Catechism* itself, and of course the catechisms are the very point at which the "distinctively Lutheran" is *least* separable from the common Christian tradition. If it is right to say that Lutheran doctrines are not instructions about what it means to be Lutheran but instructions about what it means to be Christian, then it should be no embarrassment to discover that what binds together the great and very diverse figures who define the Lutheran spiritual tradition is not Lutheranism but the apostolic *paradosis* in the central forms of its reception in the Western church.

Another question: how *important* is it that our spirituality (broadly or narrowly defined) be distinctively Lutheran? Suppose that people in a Lutheran setting are participating in a spirituality that is Lutheran in the minimal sense of not contradicting Lutheran doctrines. How important is it that they be prodded and encouraged to become *distinctively* Lutheran, shaped by Lutheran beliefs and Lutheran history in such a way as to be different from any non-Lutheran spirituality? This is a very practical issue with large consequences for our ministries of spiritual formation. For one thing, if our goal is to nurture distinctively Lutheran spirituality, we will very probably devalue elements of practice that are characteristic of Lutheran history but not distinctively so, for example participation in the tradition of the Western liturgy.

It is also a practical problem on the level of Christian experience: do we push to recapture the particular form of "troubled conscience" characteristic of the late middle ages and later emotionally repristinated in Pietism, on the grounds that it is distinctively Lutheran to have that sort of troubled conscience? Or do we look in a broad ecumenical context at the role of penitence and sorrow for sin in the wider Christian tradition and seek to find appropriate ways of receiving that tradition in our own day—ways that may not be distinctively Lutheran, even though they are consonant with Lutheran beliefs, but could be shared or at least overlap significantly with Baptists and Roman Catholics?

Another example: should we concentrate on nurturing dimensions of experience and practice that build solidarity between Lutherans and non-Lutherans, or should we concentrate on nurturing dimensions that set Lutherans apart? I tend to think it an *advantage* of the Daily Office that it is ecumenically widely diffused and tends to

bind Christians together in a common formation. I note with satisfaction the envy of Catholic friends who wish they had a form of the Office as available to laity as *LBW* Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline. Is it appropriate to devote finite resources of time and energy to promoting the renewal of daily prayer in Lutheran churches, or should we spend our time and energy doing something more "Lutheran"?

In part, these questions need answers in terms of a sense of the church's mission. I believe that we are called today away from a sense of identity structured by disagreement with other Christians to a sense of identity structured by the mission frontier between church and world. In that paradigm what is shared by different Christian traditions, the commonly received apostolic *paradosis*, becomes crucial and central, because it is what sets Christians apart from the world and at the same time directs them towards it in mission. Insofar as Lutheranism is a tradition of insight into this common Christian identity, it has a continuing right and role to play. But I think we also need to be aware of just how complex the notions of "Lutheranism" and "Lutheran identity" really are, how many questions and dimensions and pitfalls they contain, and not speak so simply and unproblematically of things like "Lutheran spirituality."

The question of contemplation

I would say that the position paper does not go into this valid issue because it is a complicated issue, and our goal was not to discuss complicated issues but rather to articulate a normative framework within which to discuss them. I would continue to claim that our paper rightly identifies an ecumenically recognizable elementary structure of Christian practice, what the broad Christian tradition concurs in regarding as really basic to spiritual practice.

I think that your remarks do not quite acknowledge just how difficult, historically and theologically, the issue of "contemplation" has been, particularly when it is marked off from *lectio* and *oratio*. My own understanding of this has been shaped not just by the jerking of my Lutheran knees but by Catholic theologians as different as Simon Tugwell and Hans Urs von Balthasar.[2] When you speak of contemplation as "awareness of the presence of God," this conceals a host of crucial questions. Is such awareness to be understood as intellectual insight (in Thomist fashion) or is it somehow transcognitive? Is it primarily an affective awareness, or is it primarily a matter of the will *intending* God beyond and in spite of feeling, or is it a *sui generis* "mystical" awareness on one (but which?) of the many accounts of such? And what does it mean to be aware of "God's presence"? Is that something other than awareness of God's *word*? Is it something different from attentiveness to the incarnate form of Jesus Christ? Is it a "higher stage" than *meditatio verbi Dei* or is it a deeper entry into the word or what?

I do not see how we could have said anything meaningful about "contemplation" without some entry into questions of this sort; I doubt that a bare reference to "awareness of the presence of God" would have been much help. I believe we did best simply to identify the framework within which we would want those questions discussed, and I think that our paper does, in fact, have some implications for the way they should be answered.

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[2] Cf. particularly Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (Ignatius, 1983), *Prayer* (Ignatius, 1986), and *Christian Meditation* (Ignatius, 1989), as well as Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (Templegate, 1985), 93–124.

For example, I think that our paper is implicitly resistant to any move that would convert the dialogical back-and-forth of word and prayer into a *ladder*, on which word and prayer are "lower" rungs transcended in "contemplation." This is not to say that the metaphor of the ladder should be taboo; but this metaphor has to be used in certain ways and not in others. Balthasar, who uses the metaphor, nonetheless qualifies it thus:

> Contemplation's ladder, reaching up to heaven, begins with the word of scripture, and whatever rung we are on, we are never beyond this hearing of the word. In contemplation, just as we can never leave the Lord's humanity behind, neither can we get "beyond" the word in its human form. It is in the humanity that we find God, in the world of sense that we find the Spirit.[3]

Likewise, our paper would seem to me to lean in Balthasar's direction when he writes:

> It is a neo-Platonic superstition that would present meditation[4] as a "higher degree" of prayer than vocal prayer, whether liturgical or spontaneous. To rate vocal prayer as a lower degree would be an anti-incarnational spiritualization. Jesus taught us vocal prayer, which presupposes, however, that we try to penetrate the depth of his words, which he places in our mouths as the fruit of his own prayer. Ecclesially this is all the more plausible, since the prayer of an assembled community must of necessity be to a considerable extent vocal prayer and because only in alternation with this common prayer can there be such a thing as a common meditative silence.[5]

On the other hand, I think that our paper is open to the possibilities Balthasar evokes when he speaks of "finding God" in the word and of "penetrating the depths" of the words of vocal prayer given us in Scripture. In other words, the paper is open to an understanding of the contemplative dimension as the *depth* of what occurs in the exchange of word and prayer. It is open to the realization that more *happens*, or can happen, in the exchange of word and prayer than a simple cognitive transaction. We had no bias against recognizing a whole range of dimensions of depth in that encounter, from a simple affective overflowing of the heart to a Spirit-wrought apprehension of the word in its otherness as *God's* word of a kind that might be called "mystical."

It might indeed have strengthened the paper if we had made gestures in the direction of such possibilities, but I am at least glad that we did not close them off. The reason we did not point in that direction was undoubtedly that we were chiefly concerned with identifying the normative shape of Christian practice rather than with charting the possibilities of Christian experience. That is, we were very much concerned with what we could say to our students in answer to the question, "Granted diversity as inevitable and desirable, is there any common bone-structure of Christian spiritual practice that unifies the diversity of spiritual paths?" That brings us rather neatly to your last concern.

The question of normativity

I think that on this point you have folded together several questions that ought to be distinguished. The question that III, 11 is answering is, "What ought to be part of every Christian's spiritual practice?" It seems to me that when you say that "a person may experience" the crucifixion/

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[3] Balthasar, *Prayer*, 9. These are the last words of the "Preface."

[4] Here this is being used in the sense of "contemplative prayer."

[5] *Christian Meditation*, 79.

resurrection shape of Christian growth "without mentally linking it to baptism" you have really introduced another question. The question under what conditions it is possible to experience Christian growth is not exactly the same question as the question of the normative shape of Christian practice. As an example, I know good and well that it is possible to be far holier than I am without participating frequently in the Eucharist. That does not stop me from vigorous recommendation of weekly celebration of the Eucharist with a Christian congregation as the normative pattern. Furthermore, when you introduce the moving story of the man dying of cancer, you introduce yet another set of issues. "In what forms may the gospel bring legitimate consolation to the dying?" is again not exactly the same question as that of the normative shape of practice among the living.

I think it is important to distinguish these questions and let the question about normative practice have its own weight. One of the things that has threatened the integration of Lutheran church life and piety has been the constant reduction of the question about normative practice to some form of the question, "What must we do to be saved?" When we reduce the question about the form of life and piety to the question of necessity for salvation, the question about salvation tends to become reductionist: "What is the least we can get away with?" Kierkegaard once said that Socrates' confession that all we can know is that we know nothing had one meaning when uttered at the end of a life spent in pursuit of wisdom, but would have a very different meaning if announced by an undergraduate as a personal policy statement.

Now if the question of normative practice is brought clearly into view and distinguished from these other questions, I would stand by the claim that intentional reckoning with baptism is integral to that norm. As I understand baptism, it is the divine act by which my "self" is *constituted* as a self-in-Christ and at the same time a self-in-community with the people of God. By baptism I am claimed *by* God and *for* God's mission in the *ekklesia*. This claiming establishes *communion*, a new mutuality, so it is not magic but evokes faith and must be received by faith. But it is nonetheless the definitive act of God by which God's act in Christ becomes the form of *my* life. It is therefore an act which must be reckoned with. It embraces and encompasses my whole life. It cannot be surpassed but only explored in the boundlessness of its meaning.

Reckoning with baptism and reckoning with the dying and rising of Jesus are not two different things.

Now, where I could perhaps do justice to your concern is this: there is a peculiar sort of *transparency* to baptism. One can see this in Romans 6. Reckoning with baptism and reckoning with the dying and rising of Jesus are not two different things; rather to reckon with baptism *is* to reckon with the dying and rising of Jesus—as the form of *my* life. Insofar as I reckon with the dying and rising of Jesus as the form of *my* life, I am implicitly reckoning with baptism since it is baptism which establishes the legitimacy of that *my*. So in this sense, I could agree that not every real reckoning

with baptism involves forming a mental picture of the font.

But it is nonetheless important that the *grounds* on which I reckon with the dying and rising of Jesus as the form of *my* life be explicit. It makes a difference that those grounds are given in a public, ceremonial, non-repeatable act which is performed *on* me rather than *by* me. It makes a difference that the act in question is a washing which is also a burial. It makes a difference that it is *also* irreducibly an act of incorporation into a particular community. All this has crucial implications for what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, one can only suppose that God chose to claim us in a *sacrament*, a communicative action which speaks and has meaning, because he wanted us to reckon in faith with that meaning.

So for these reasons, I would still say that, yes, the normative shape of Christian piety, what all Christians ought to be encouraged to make part of their regular exercise of faith, does involve recollection of baptism. And it does seem to me that there is a proper sense in which all Christian discipline is *founded* on baptism. That is something different from saying that all Christian *growth* or *experience* is founded on mental acts recalling baptism. Discipline involves intentionality, and the intentionality that fashions disciplines of life in Christ can only be a response to and affirmation of God's founding act of gift-giving in baptism.

Let me point out in conclusion that the issue of the relation of experience to practice arises again at the end of your response, in connection with this point. You seem again to suppose that we can fairly easily distinguish "practicing spiritual disciplines" from "the underlying experiential reality of dying and rising with Christ" and that the experience is somehow *there* apart from and prior to Christian practice, so that the practice of remembering baptism—or presumably any other practice—must "take second place" to the experiential reality. Speaking here again only for myself, I do not know quite what to make of this. I do not know where this experiential reality comes from if not from engagement with the gospel; indeed, I do not know what it *is* if not the experiential dimension of engagement with the gospel.

Moreover, I do not know how one approaches the "experience of lived Christian faith" except as the experience *of* God's words and signs through which he confers on us the gift of his Son in the Spirit. Indeed, at some point, in some real sense, I would want to say that the presence of Christ for me in baptism, in Scripture, in the proclaimed word, in the gathering of two or three or more, or in the Eucharist, is the *reality* in relation to which it is my "experience" that is secondary and derivative.

In light of the Lutheran theology of the *verbum externum*, which I take to be a commentary on the sacramentalism of the catholic tradition, I would therefore want to challenge the distinction you make between "practicing spiritual disciplines" and "the experience of lived Christian faith." I think that our paper, by its sacramental theology of the external word, transcends that dichotomy and reconciles it. The two sides are reconciled in the turn to the word in which Christ is present—in the remembrance of baptism, in *lectio-meditatio*, in public worship, in the eucharistic feast. That turn is the center and substance of *both* spiritual practice *and* the experience of lived Christian faith, and does not permit the ranking of the two in terms of the hierarchies of inner and outer, soul and body, experience and practice, which modernity inherited from the Platonists and used for its own distinctive purposes.

A Book Worth Discussing: *Authority Vested. A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod* by Mary Todd

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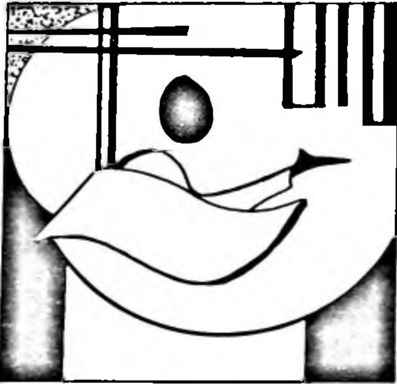
Authority Vested. A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. By Mary Todd. Foreword by Martin E. Marty. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. xvi and 336 pages. Paper. $20.00.

This is a history of the LCMS, told by a woman (and a onetime writer for *Currents*) and focusing on the twin questions of authority in general and the debate about the ordination of women in particular. It grows out of and expands upon her doctoral dissertation accepted at the University of Illinois at Chicago: "'Not in God's Lifetime': The Question of the Ordination of Women in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod." Todd currently serves as associate professor of history and director of the Honors Program at Concordia University (LCMS) in River Forest, Illinois. She is a loyal *and* critical insider.

She notes how the synod has identified with the issue of verbal scriptural inerrancy as a mark of its identity in its own struggle to reconcile orthodox Lutheranism with twentieth-century concerns. Its opposition to women's ordination is based on a literal biblical understanding of gender roles, especially male headship and female subordination. In fact, Todd charges, the ban on the ordination of women and the insistence on inerrancy are inextricably entwined. The synod's identity depends on absolute adherence to the fusion of these two principles.

Todd divides the history of this Lutheran denomination into three periods, the first two of which were dominated by the shadows of two theologians: C. F. W. Walther and Francis Pieper. The third was marked by a struggle over whether the synod would define itself by repristinating its earlier leaders' teachings or by extending the theological legacy of its first century into modern America. Here falls the Concordia crisis and the birth of Seminex, but here also falls the quarter century after Seminex and the issues of authority and women's ordination as discussed—or avoided—today.

She begins the story in Saxony of the early 1830s, where anti-rationalist and pietistic tendencies came together in Pastor



Martin Stephan of Dresden. The Prussian Union of 1817 was King Frederick William III's effort to combine the Lutheran and Reformed Protestants, an event that forms the Egypt of Missouri's myth. Stephan gathered around himself a circle of young pastors who would eventually become the nucleus of the clergy who founded the synod in 1847. Stephan was also an authoritarian and managed to get himself elected bishop as he crossed the Atlantic with like-minded immigrants in 1839. High-handed administration, questionable financial dealings, and, finally, sexual misconduct were his undoing. At 62 he was excommunicated and deposed and then rowed across the Mississippi into Illinois, where he died seven years later.

In response, some of the leaders of the group that settled in St. Louis and Perry County, Missouri, thought they were not a church at all and should head back to Germany, but then Walther argued, at Altenburg, Missouri, that the church consisted of the totality of believers, and this brought a sense of legitimacy to the immigrant community and the opportunity to begin anew. Todd believes, however, that the remaining clergy's dogged refusal to make a frank confession of their collaboration in advancing the Stephanite episcopacy allies them with the hierarchical model of ministry Stephan established and intended. It also left the ministry itself in a perpetual state of redefinition.

When the Missouri Synod was founded in 1847, in Chicago, it resoundingly affirmed the position of clergy in leadership. The only office open to a layperson was that of treasurer. Todd tells the story of the widespread Lutheran debates about ministry in the nineteenth century in which the participants asked no quarter and gave none. J. A. A. Grabau of the Buffalo synod called the Saxons "heretics and false prophets preaching to mobs" and "a synod of abomination and a Temple of Babel." The Saxons returned the fire by calling Grabau and his followers "papists and tyrants." But until he died in 1887 Walther was the whole show in Missouri—president of the church body, president of one of its seminaries, and the synod's chief theologian. For most of the nineteenth century, the Missouri Synod was an ethnic enclave that looked to one leader, Walther, for direction and course. The early crisis had been resolved by compromises on definitions of church and ministry. Once that crisis was past there would be no more compromises.

Throughout its history Missouri has struggled to define the offices of pastor and of parochial school teacher. Where did the latter fit when the synod allowed for only two kinds of people—pastors and the laity? Women teachers were a special "problem," with one theologian (George Stoeckhardt) opining that women could teach as long as it was only to young children and provided that teaching would not be their life's goal. An article by Paul Kretzmann in the first volume (1930) of the *Concordia Theological Monthly*—of which *Currents* is a kind of errant/faithful child—insisted: "God has

placed the business of the Church in the hands of men, and therefore any and every attempt of a woman publicly to influence these affairs is a usurpation of rights which cannot be squared with God's plain command and prohibition." There were brief counter movements, such as the statement of the forty-four in 1945, which protested the synod's insularity. Unfortunately, under pressure from John Behnken, the synodical president, the "forty-four" agreed to withdraw their statement, but not recant it. The statement had challenged the elevation of synodical resolutions over the authority of Scripture, and the ready reliance on the synod's historic position against "unionism," which granted new authority to tradition itself. A chance for an open discussion of differences was missed.

The death of Francis Pieper in 1931 marked the end of an era when one person spoke for the synod. Pieper had narrowed the confessional base of the synod through his insistence on an inerrant Bible, and his demand for total conformity before initiating church fellowship destroyed the possibility for any ecumenical liaisons. Missouri bobbed and weaved over the roles of women teachers, deaconesses, and a women's auxiliary, eventually yielding to the inevitable but always reaffirming "biblical" prescriptions that limited women's service.

Todd devotes a chapter to the issue of women's suffrage in the church. In 1969 the synod affirmed the right of women to vote even though only 10 percent of congregations allowed women to attend voters' meetings and only one percent gave them the right to vote. She concludes: "The primary contested issue in the history of the Missouri Synod has always been the authority—of scripture, of synod, of the congregation, of the pastoral office, of woman, of man." She ends the chapter with a sharp question: "Is the prohibition of women from the pastoral office scripturally mandated—because the Bible says so—or synodically mandated—because the synod says so—or is it because the synod says the Bible says so?" Missouri has a funny note in its constitution: matters of doctrine are decided by the Word of God and all other matters by majority vote. Guess how you find out what the Word of God means?

Missouri representatives, it turns out, were part of the pan-Lutheran discussion of the ordination of women in the 60s. While it is unlikely that Missouri would have joined the LCA and ALC in affirming women's ordination at that time, its theologians on that commission agreed that nothing in Scripture prevented this move. But then came the Denver convention in 1969, the election of Jacob Preus as president, the restaffing of all boards and commissions, and the beginning of the investigation that led to the formation of Christ Seminary-Seminex. Martin Scharlemann eventually threw a monkey wrench into the discussion about women's ordination by insisting on the "order of creation." Scharlemann himself was either a turncoat or notoriously inconsistent. He had come to public attention in Missouri as an advocate of historical criticism in biblical studies. Later, some say because of frustration over not being elected president of Concordia Seminary, he denounced historical criticism, became a spokesperson for the reactionary leadership of the synod, and was appointed acting president when forty-five of us were dismissed from Concordia Seminary in 1974. In 1971 the Missouri Synod Civil War was already in full flower, and one reactionary voice revealingly lumped a lot of issues together: "Some individuals today are advocating the use of elements other than those ordained by God for His holy institutions, such as the use of (a) Coke and pizza, donuts and coffee, etc., for the eucharist,

The absence of women in the debate over women's service has been striking.

(b) homosexuals or lesbians for marriage, (c) women for ordination to the holy ministry" (*Workbook* for the 1971 LCMS Convention in Milwaukee, p. 113). Todd observes: "The exaggerated fears expressed in this resolution equating serious sacramental or ethical questions with women's ordination attest to the stridence of the opposition to the ordination of women."

In 1974, the year in which Seminex was formed, a synodical Task Force on Women held its first meeting. The Task Force decided to avoid the question of the ordination of women, beginning a pattern by which loyal Missouri women deferred to the denomination's contention that the ordination of women was not to be discussed. The synodically compliant chair of that Task Force, without consulting her fellow members, even tried to get a synodical convention to disband her own Task Force.

By 1981, Jacob Preus, who led the attack on the Concordia faculty, retired from the synodical presidency and was succeeded by Ralph Bohlmann. Bohlmann had been part of the five right-wing minority members of the Concordia faculty and had in fact drafted "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" that was designed to undermine his colleagues during the Preus investigation. (Bohlmann's own *post mortem* on "A Statement" is revealing: "I never thought it would be picked up by people and made into some comprehensive statement of belief. It was intended as a tool" [p. 224, n. 72]). Not surprisingly the convention that elected him also scuttled fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Bohlmann, who was later defeated because of fears he might not be conservative enough vis à vis women and other issues, ironically becomes a major source for Todd in the remainder of the book when she seeks a "moderate" voice in Missouri.

In 1984 Bohlmann had appointed a President's Commission on Women that was comprised solely of women. It turns out that all the members of the Commission were opposed to women's ordination and did not want to talk about it. Meanwhile the all-male Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued a report in 1985 that called not for women's ordination but for their subordination. When Alvin Barry, the current president of the LCMS, surprisingly retained the President's Commission on Women, he told it to focus on women's issues and listed a number of issues for them to consider, specifically not including women's service in the church. (No presiding bishop in the ELCA would dare to do that—thank God!)

Todd concludes that the women of Missouri often present the greatest obstacle to change. The Lutheran Women's Missionary League, the synod's women's auxiliary, for instance, declined to take a position on women's ordination in 1991 because it was a political question, and "the LWML desires to remain apolitical." Of course, many women, faced by such reaction, have simply left. I have been amazed as I have talked to LSTC women students and ordained women in the ELCA how many of them hail somewhere in their life from Missouri. Missouri is losing some of its best and brightest.

Todd argues that Missouri's self-proclaimed defense of Lutheran confessional principles should require it to admit that the ordination of women is an adiaphoron, a matter of evangelical freedom. She thinks, however, that three additional factors are at stake: the synod's understanding of Scripture, its understanding of the pastoral office of ministry, and its understanding of women. The synod's prohibition of women from the pastoral office remains its most visible commitment to its stand on inerrancy. When the CTCR based its findings on a timeless order of creation hierarchy, one woman commented: "Nobody believes that anymore!" Four interrelated issues remain problematic for the synod: ministry, women, Scripture, and church polity.

Todd argues that it was through the founding of a synod of like-minded congregations that Walther was able to reclaim for the clergy some of the status and authority they had ceded in the Stephan aftermath. The absence of women in the debate over women's service has been striking. The CTCR declared in 1985 that a call to public ministry is denied to women by "a command of the Lord." Todd adds: "They do not cite where that command might be found." By introducing the principle of "order of creation" into its doctrine of ministry they reaffirmed the notion of hierarchy that was supposedly sent into exile with Stephan. Todd notes that the founding fathers (so) of Missouri fled doctrinal and cultural conformity in Germany only to impose a conformity to the fundamentalist Americanizing of Christianity. She ends her book plaintively: Is a return to a genuine catholic and confessional posture possible? How inclusive will Missouri's mission and vision be?

Early on Todd laments that in the LCMS there is neither a professional female theological voice nor a visible feminist minority. Happily, her own person and scholarly work are a partial rebuttal to this deficiency.

Preaching Helps

First Sunday in Advent—The Transfiguration of Our Lord
Series C

In Peace

Pondering war, Caesar Augustus issued a decree: "Take a census!" He needed exact information on the manpower and potential revenue from his far-flung territories, so that he with his architects and generals might plan for the continuing beautification of Rome ("he found it brick and left it marble") and for the ongoing extension of the empire. He and his successors marched forth conquering in the name of the Pax Romana, bringing the blessings, they said, of Roman civilization to subject peoples. A century after Augustus, the Roman historian Tacitus quotes a British king, defeated by Roman arms, as complaining that "Rome creates a desert and calls it peace."

Luke is the only New Testament writer who ever names a Roman emperor (Augustus in Luke 2:1, Tiberius in 3:1, Claudius in Acts 18:2, and he is clearly referring to Nero when he notes how Paul appealed to "Caesar" in Acts 25:11, etc.). He writes the story of Jesus and the early church not only *in the context of* Judean and imperial politics but *against* the old politics. Quite deliberately he uses politically charged language as he speaks of Jesus as the "lord" of a new "kingdom." Luke alone notes that the opponents of Jesus charge him with fomenting a revolution, forbidding people to pay their taxes, and saying that he is himself a king, a rival to Caesar (Luke 23:1–5). Similarly, the enemies of Paul charge him with disturbing the peace, inciting people to act against the decrees of Caesar, and proclaiming that there is "another king" or "another emperor" named Jesus (Acts 17:6–9).

It might have been prudent for Luke and other early Christians to abandon the language of politics in speaking of God and Jesus, but they refused to do so. And they bequeathed a sizeable problem to succeeding generations, including our own. What is the relationship between God's kingdom, God's governance, God's politics, and the ordinary realms and governments and politics of the U.S.A., the European Union, Sierra Leone, and all the other political units, large and small? In the midst of our politics, how shall we proclaim and practice the politics of God?

How shall we announce and how shall we act so that our words and deeds are in harmony with the angelic word: "To you has been born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord!" The caesars have always said that they bring salvation and they are in charge. They are usually happy (these days, at any rate) if we confine our devotion to God and Christ to some inner or private area, leaving the public arena to them.

And the angelic choir sang, "Peace on earth." That chorus was echoed by the residents of Jerusalem when Jesus entered the city, riding on a colt. Crowds cried out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38).

Luke tells the story of how the lordship of Jesus was established in Jerusalem (Luke) and in the city of Rome (Acts). And he insists throughout the 52 chapters of his two volumes that God in Jesus is giving us a better empire (*basileia*), a better emperor (*kyrios*), and a better peace (*eirene*) than Caesar Augustus and all his successors, ancient or modern. He insists; he proclaims; he celebrates. But he does not give us detailed instructions on how to live as members of Christ's peaceable kingdom today. That's up to us to envision and to embody.
We need one another's help in carrying out our task of reading Luke and proclaiming Jesus as Lord of a peaceable kingdom. We are fortunate to have the help of three writers who lend their hearts and hands to the task.

Lucy Kolin is Pastor of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Oakland, California. She has been a pastor for fifteen years. Before that she was a Lutheran school teacher, a community organizer, and an editor for the Rockefeller Foundation. Resurrection is a congregation of about 175 baptized members, and roughly a quarter of the membership is African, mostly from Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, and Eritrea. She refers in her writing to some of her experience with them in Oakland and to a visit she herself made to the African homelands from which some of them hail. She has written for these pages more than once in the past, and it is good to welcome her again.

Phil Ruge-Jones teaches theology at Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, Texas. He has personal and scholarly interest in Luther's thought, Hispanic theologies, and other movements where theology and culture meet. He and his wife Lori are biblical storytellers who have done several workshops to equip others in this art. He invites continuing conversation around these Lukan texts; write to him at TLU or via e-mail at *pruge-jones@txlutheran.edu*. Phil organized a group of pastors to write for these pages previously, and it is good to welcome him back, as he writes here in his own name.

Our third contributor to this issue is **Peter W. Rehwaldt**. Peter is a Graduate

Theological Union Ph.D. candidate in homiletics and a PLTS adjunct faculty member. Thus he is both a student and a colleague here in Berkeley, bringing to these tasks pastoral experience from parishes in St. Louis, Kansas City, and Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Kansas. His doctoral work is centered on how preachers can preach to people of different generations, all with the same sermon. Peter focuses on faces in each set of texts and calls on us to notice the similar faces before us in our pews.

Thanks to these three good colleagues! And blessings to all proclaimers of the mystery of God's powerful intervention in human affairs in the life and death and new life of Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth.

In peace,

Robert H. Smith, Editor of Preaching Helps
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
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First Sunday in Advent December 3, 2000

Jeremiah 33:14–15
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
Luke 21:25–36

The readings for the very first Sunday in Advent set us squarely on the road that leads to Christmas . . . which is anything but a routine trip or one we can make with our eyes closed. We hear prophet, psalmist, Paul, and Jesus himself say things that startle us awake, that make our eyes open wide.

They alert us, first of all, to the liturgical, theological time travel that marks this season. For Advent is both looking backward to God's faithful promises so that we will be able to recognize their fulfillment in Jesus (and, in the end, in us) *and* looking ahead to the second advent to find encouragement and the pattern for our present lives. The blue season may be a more contemplative season for the church, but it's not without its moment of whiplash—as we look forward and backward at the same time, as, like Jeremiah's own people, we find our downsized hopes for ourselves and the world constantly colliding with God's ever-expanding and ceaselessly hopeful redemption.

Yet it's always whiplash in the service of the Advent mystery, what Thomas Merton described as "the beginning of the end of all in us that is not yet Christ." And that accounts for the exhortations we hear today and on the three Sundays that follow. Or perhaps, in view of the impending Nativity, we ought to regard these exhortations as our regimen of prenatal care. For the Christ once born in Bethlehem now chooses to be born not far from us, but in us and in the very midst of us. So, Paul and Jesus call us to prepare ourselves by prayer and alertness, and counsel us to eat the divinely nutritious Word and practice the good posture ("stand up and raise your heads," Lk 21:28) born of faith and hope.

These readings are also filled with messages about signs and signals: how to spot them, how to respond to them. Shoots and branches sprout in unlikely places; new paths appear right alongside the old ruts of despair. Sun, moon, and stars break from their ancient patterns, unsettling the waters of earth, making room for new creation. And whole communities called "church" surprise themselves and their neighbors by living together in love.

When I was in Tanzania, my friends Reese and Emmanuel taught me how to track animals in the bush by their spoor and their smell. (Did you know that cobras smell like well-cooked rice?) In some cases, we were trying to find the creatures; in others, we were hoping to avoid them. Knowing the signs helped us to know what to expect and what to do. Watching for the signs helped us to avoid being caught unawares.

According to Luke, Jesus doesn't want us to avoid the signs that are to be seen or to fear them. Instead, we are encouraged to expect them and to recognize them for what they are: not signals to hide from the wrath that is to come, but cause for rejoicing that "the dominion of God is near."

Jesus himself—his life and death and resurrection—is the truest sign we know, especially in the unprecedented miracle of life flowering from the dead wood of the cross. Now, by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, in our own time and geography, too, there are signs to be seen in us and in the world around us. (What do you make, for example, of the Jubilee 2000 movement, fueled largely by the prayers and petitions of people of faith?) Commissioned by baptism and incorporated by Eucharist, we are now called to become signs others will see, signs meant for encouragement, not foreboding, signs that engender joy and gratitude, not terror or despair. This is what Paul's scribbled letter and his living letter, Timothy, were to the Thessalonians, and what the Thessalonians' maturing in faith was to Paul.

Of course, we cannot deny that there is agony among the nations or the threat of ecological collapse. We dare not deny that terrible illnesses claim young and old too soon and in ways too painful to watch. Even preachers cannot deny that often we feel as though we are treading water without any hope of rescue. (And make no mistake, these thoughts will be alive and at work in the minds of every parishioner—if not our own minds—as we preach.)

But we also cannot deny that God is faithful, and therein lies our hope. Like the old Burma Shave signs that filled long empty stretches of highway with their clever rhymes, that kept drivers and passengers waiting eagerly for the next billboard and the end of the jingle, the church's eagerness and hope, her persistent prayer and deeds of love and justice, will not let the world forget that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

To consider: What if we created in the sanctuary the Advent counterpart of the wailing wall: a "hoping wall" for old and young to record signs that "the dominion of God" is near? What if we heard the Advent readings and prayers through the visual filter of hope already being realized or about to break through the crust of the world's despair? LAK

Faces

"Be careful," said the mom to her face-making son, "or your face will get stuck like that." Jesus points to distracted, worried, fearful faces, and we see them today in malls, offices, on the news, and in our homes. Now Jesus urges all to reshape their faces: do not fear, but be alert and stand strong in faith. Exchange your worries for God's strength. PWR

Second Sunday in Advent December 10, 2000

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

Anyone who spends any time at all with Luke's Gospel quickly learns how much the evangelist delights in recounting God's liberating deeds across the ages. Luke absolutely revels in illustrating God's penchant for reversing the odds for the poor and the powerless, for upsetting the apple cart of the old world order.

This Sunday, instead of a selection from the book of Psalms, we sing another song, the *Benedictus*, Luke's own primer of salvation. Placed on the lips of Zechariah as inspired testimony, the canticle braids together past, present, and future to emphasize the utter reliability of the promises of God. The *Benedictus* is a song of the happy reversal of fortunes for God's little ones. Like the rest of Luke, it rehearses much more than a spiritualized salvation. Like Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, it paints a picture of a redemption that addresses every part of life, that has political, economic, and social implications.

It's also a song that doesn't end when Zechariah ceases to speak. Rather its second stanza is to be found in today's Gospel, when the word of the Lord comes to John, Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, compelling him into the wilderness to cry repentance and announce the greater One to come. Indeed, the primer of salvation never closes; it continues to unfold as people in every generation are inspired by the Spirit to rehearse the mighty deeds of salvation and to proclaim the reign of God. We, too, by virtue of our baptism now join the song, adding our own contemporary and particular stanzas.

The abruptness with which John bursts on the scene reminds us of the suddenness with which "the messenger of the covenant" is to come to the temple and the startling content of his mission. As always, the ambiguity of who the messenger may be—whether in the *Benedictus* or in the words of Malachi—is less dilemma than blessing, causing us immediately to consider the whole spectrum of salvation-history and the place of every figure in it, including John the Baptizer and Jesus himself.

There is also the unexpectedness of the messianic herald—and later the Messiah himself—emerging from the vague landscape of the powerless and insignificant. Luke sets up this dramatic contrast by reminding us with great specificity of all those who were presumed to be in control, who believed themselves in charge of the course of the world: Tiberius, Pilate, the Herods, the high priests. Then he shatters the old assumptions by dropping John into their midst without warning to herald God's new order.

There is much to be encouraged about in these readings. Yet it's clear the "harvest of righteousness" Paul speaks about is not yet here. Indeed, Paul himself is writing from prison, unable to complete his own work fully, bound by physical and legal constraints. So, speaking to the Philippians and probably also to himself, Paul writes about what it means to live "between the advents." Like Luke, he emphasizes the reliability of God, who will not abandon what has been begun ("I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ," Phil 1:6).

Paul also spells out the difference between God's job description and ours. God's job is to bring the divine mission to comple-

tion, to "gather a harvest from the seeds that were sown." Ours is a more modest mission but also divinely inspired: to live a life of joy, not anxiety, by learning what ultimately matters, then ordering our life together according to those priorities, which all add up to love. As Paul Sampley says it in *Walking Between the Times* (Fortress, 1991): "Love fills up one's life and informs all moral knowing and doing in such a way that one sorts out and does the things that really matter." This is the "harvest of righteousness," the true covenant life, the truest and best offering Malachi longed to see.

To consider: What would your canticle of salvation sound like? Could several individuals with gifts for poetry and music create a congregational canticle that names the ways God has kept faith with the people of God in your community, that rehearses a happy reversal of fortune for your church, that sings out loud how God has "gather[ed] a harvest from the seeds that were sown"? LAK

Faces

"Be careful," said the librarian to a group of eager young readers, armed with their new library cards. "You can't judge a book by its cover." First Luke shows us the powerful faces—emperors, governors, tetrarchs, and high priests—each with their seats in places of power: palaces, mansions, and temples. Then Luke shows us John, and we hear his preaching. Now where's the powerful face? PWR

Third Sunday in Advent December 17, 2000

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

Everybody knows Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the "major league" prophets. But few remember Zephaniah, a cultic prophet and probably a member of the group of prophets and Levites spearheading the Deuteronomistic reform under King Josiah of Judah (640–609 B.C.E.). But this "minor league" player delivers some "major league" oracles about the "great day of the Lord, depicted as a final judgment day for those who have broken covenant with God. It is the unmistakable revelation that God *does* care for creation and community, cares enough to intervene and mete out justice. Yet it is a day "circumscribed . . . as a moment in time with a beginning and an end," as Robert Bennett writes in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 12), and thus opens the door to a new future.

It is this new future that is portrayed in chapter 3, beginning at v. 9. It is Zephaniah's—and God's—last word, and is indeed cause for rejoicing. God will comfort and restore those who wait patiently for the Lord and serve God "with one accord." God's work of rehabilitation is presented as an act of love. The "savior" God is depicted as a warrior, crowing with victory and cavorting with the emancipated in the midst of Jerusalem. In the end, in words certain to stir up hope in an exiled people (the last verses seem a post-exilic addition), God commutes Jerusalem's death sentence and gathers them home not to the old ways but to a new day and another way. Now it becomes clear why the prophet cries, "Sing aloud . . .

shout. . . . Rejoice and exult with all your heart!" (3:14)

This turning from judgment to joy is also the movement in the Gospel reading. John the Baptizer greets those who gather at the Jordan with unvarnished speech; he immediately strips away the polished illusions with which they'd clothed themselves for the encounter. Indeed, he delivers Zephaniah's own apocalyptic speech in far fewer words. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" is John's opening volley, followed by a call to repentance and an utterly different life, utterly committed to God . . . and oh, yes, some words about an axe and dead wood and fire. You can almost smell the smoke and flame.

But instead of booing John or walking away, the crowds begin to ask, "What then should we do?" What would such a life look like? What does it mean for us in our particular lives and vocations? And John answers them, giving specific examples of the sort of life-change that comes from aligning oneself with the God of Israel. Relationships, business practices, economics, power and authority all will be changed. No one and nothing is excluded from the tidal wave of repentance. Yet there was a certain joy to find a way out of being destroyed by unfaithfulness and a certain hope that comes from concrete responses to genuine questions about how to live the life of faith. Would that my own preaching were as revealing of the trap of faithlessness and lip-service to God *and* of the escape hatch of grace God provides. And would that I were the kind of pastor who could help people discern concrete ways to be faithful in their real and ordinary daily lives. It isn't necessary to issue a list of instructions; it is essential to abide and pray with people struggling to live authentic lives of faith. Is this [illegible]r goal, too? What and who helps you to accomplish it . . . or even just keep at it?

The reading from Philippians begins with the verse that was the old versicle for the Introit of the Third Sunday in Advent in the ancient Roman liturgy, and its first word in Latin, *Gaudete*, gave this Sunday its liturgical name. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (3:4).

Perhaps, like me, you are struck that "rejoice" and "exhortation" have something to do with each other (like righteousness and peace kissing each other?). But the movement from law to gospel, from judgment to grace that is stunningly clear in Zephaniah and Luke gives us every reason to rejoice. We no longer need to worry or fear God; we no longer need to be looking around for the axe poised to cut us down. Instead we can be confident that we rest, hearts and minds, in the peace of God, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the message even Zephaniah's name brings, "God protects" and "God treasures"; therefore, God will not utterly destroy.

To consider:

. . . Christianity was once a desert sermon,
Mean and sharp as the terrible africus,
Burning as the desert sand.
But we turned it into a garden idyll,
Mignonettes, asters and pious roses,
A romantic mood in Gethsemane.

Lord, take care of our pious cowardice!
Give it swift eagle wings and sharp lion's claws!
Give it scent of wild honey and simoom
And then say with the Baptist's voice:
This is the victory that conquers the world.
This is Christianity.

—Nils Bolander, "Christianity Was Once An Eagle Message," in *20th Century Scandinavian Poetry*, ed. Martin S. Allwood (Sweden: Marston Hill Mullsjo, 1950). LAK

Faces

"What should we do?" A crowd of people, each with two faces, facing John at the river: economically prosperous yet inwardly troubled people, politically privileged yet socially ostracized tax collectors, physically powerful yet spiritually nervous soldiers. There's a hunger and a thirst, down by the riverside and seated in the pews. What, preachers, should we do? PWR

Fourth Sunday in Advent December 24, 2000

Micah 5:2–5a
Luke 1:47–55 or Psalm 80:1–7
Hebrews 10:5–10
Luke 1:39–45 [46–55]

Whether we mean to or not, we Christians tend to describe the miracle of salvation in neat little paragraphs and in an orderly fashion. It's a sort of theology with hospital corners that can make it seem as though everyone, from Adam and Eve on, could see and accept God's every move in the history of salvation. That's a very curious approach to take, since Scripture is filled with stories of people being surprised by God at every turn and being utterly amazed at the cast of characters assigned the leading roles.

It's like that with the Advent stories, too. We sometimes work hard as preachers pulling and pushing together the strands and stories from every Gospel until they form a neat little package, one that has us saying, "Of course" . . . "Naturally" . . . and "How sensible." But the truth is, it wasn't that way at all. The God revealed to us in the stories of Advent is the God of surprises who relegated the rich and already famous to the background and called forward the runts and rejects of history to center stage. Children yet unborn, unwed mothers, women far beyond childbearing age, and misfit prophets all see and speak of God, while those whose business it is to watch for the Messiah fail to see the mystery that is unfolding right in front of their noses.

Reading today's Gospel and the words of Micah reminds me of the drawings preschoolers love to make, the ones where the people who are important in their lives are drawn as large as giants, where a simple house becomes as large as a Rockefeller mansion. That's the way it is in God's view of things, too. In the Gospel reading, the happy reunion of two women—pregnant against the odds and against the norm—becomes a gathering of prophets, and a simple peasant's inspired song becomes the announcement of God's eternal jubilee. This, and not some neatly wrapped, prepackaged redemption, was God's wild and blessed plan . . . and it worked!

And there were more surprises to come. The one as yet unborn in today's Gospel became the one who did the will of God from birth to cross to grave to resurrection ("Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'" [Heb 10:7a]).

The Visitation gospel also suggests that the church is called to be a surprising people. And to help us along, the Spirit of Christ lives and moves within us, sometimes gently, sometimes with an unmistakable kick that nearly takes our breath away, to keep us alert to the presence of God, to reconnect us to our joy, to call us to the wild life of radical obedience that can make disobedience seem absolutely boring! How is *your* congregation a surprising presence in your neighborhood or community?

There are many beautiful icons of Mary and Elizabeth greeting one another. All of them remind us that the Spirit of Christ continues to draw us together for comfort and for joy. This deep and intimate com-

munion of believers pregnant with the surprising Christ is, even in our own time, astonishing to the world. It is a striking witness in a time and place where technology and the very pace of life have the power both to connect us instantly and to lead us further away from each other day by day. I wonder: what are the particular ways my congregation—and yours—have become a living icon of those who have been visited by God and who now visit others with comfort and joy?

Happily, each Sunday we celebrate Eucharist in the parish I serve. When we do, I believe we are tasting the promise of God's last surprise, that "great and final advent" when we will laugh with amazement to see the startling collection of saints gathered to share the feast that never ends. And I can just see God, jumping out from behind some holy curtain, yelling, "Surprise!" Can't you?

To consider: When I think of the history of salvation and the genealogies we *don't* have in this cycle of readings, I'm tempted to try something that smacks of both the ELCA Youth Gathering worship conga lines ("Dancing at the Crossroads" was the theme, remember?) and Peter Schuman's Bread and Puppet Theatre parade of ancestors. What would it be like to have a special procession on this last Sunday in Advent in which people wearing sandwich board signs with the name of an ancestor of Jesus (Luke 3:23–38) parade/dance down the aisle and fill the chancel area during the reading of Micah? Because Luke's genealogy is patriarchal, perhaps we could provide Matthai, Methuselah, and Adam with spouses! Or let men and women, boys and girls play the male parts. Remember, it is the Sunday of surprises! LAK

Faces

"It's almost time," said one expectant mother to another. "I wonder what their lives will be like." Two expectant faces—Elizabeth and Mary—meeting one another as the day grows closer when their lives will be turned upside down. *They* are expecting children, Jesus and John. But what are *we* expecting? It's almost time. . . . PWR

The Nativity of Our Lord
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2000

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11–14
Luke 2:1–14 [15–20]

Faces

It's time. The faces of advent converge in Luke's story of a stable—today's powerful Emperor Quirinius and yesterday's powerful King David, the expectant faces of Mary and Joseph, the fearful faces of shepherds startled by an army of angels which become hungry faces as they race to see the child in the manger. These advent faces converge in our sanctuaries as well—powerful, expectant, fearful, and hungry—everyone comes on this one night, because it's *time*. PWR

The Nativity of Our Lord
Christmas Day
December 25, 2000

Isaiah 52:7–10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1–4 [5–12]
John 1:1–14

The parish I serve is one of the few Lutheran parishes in Oakland to offer a Christmas Day service—and Eucharist at that! I am always moved by the intimacy of Christmas Eve, by the power of light being born out of deepest midnight. But I am even more moved by Christmas Day, when the faithful gather to take another look at the Incarnation by the bright light of morning and discover the living Word still present, still true, still effective.

It's also a relief to find texts that refuse to treat Christmas like some private matter of the heart, insisting instead that it's a matter of community. Isaiah paints a picture of the message of good news passed from messenger to sentinel to the chosen people to all the ends of the earth. And the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, though profoundly poetic, reveals not a spiritualized Messiah but God in the flesh, who willingly set up camp among us and refused to be exempt from any human experience, even suffering and death. Because that's so, we can trust that God knows firsthand the fault lines of evil and injustice that run through our lives in the world and destroy community.

The loss of community stands at the heart of Isaiah's words, for he was writing to a people who had lost their homeland, who had seen the fabric of their community ripped apart. A community of withered faith, of full-blown shame, becomes the community of living faith and full-blown joy when Yahweh takes possession of the desolate city and calls the exiles home to bring the city to life.

The Johannine community also knew the pain of being severed from their communities of birth and religious heritage. So the Prologue brings welcome news that God has created a new community in which they are chosen to live as more than members, as sons and daughters of God. This was holy balm for people who felt homeless in the land of their birth.

And the Prologue makes clear that God in Christ also knew rejection, of living unknown and unclaimed by those who had the most reason to know him and love him. Eventually this rejection took on the shape of the cross.

In our own parish the contemporary pain of exile has been made real to us through the stories and lives of Rwandans forced to flee from their homeland, some for the second time, in the wake of the 1994 genocide. Five years ago we baptized a young Rwandan girl on Christmas morning. Monika and her family had been waiting for an opportunity to have her baptized, for a moment of peace and safety in the war and turmoil that kept them on the run. On that Christmas Day we welcomed Monika and her parents Jean Bosco and Sana into the community of Resurrection. It was an amazing moment, as we experienced the resolve and patience of Monika's family fulfilled, as we began to understand what a miracle it was that they had not lost faith but continued to believe they would be delivered—not just to a new nation, but to a new faith community that would love and care for them as fellow members of the same Body of Christ.

They were—and are—a gift to us because their lives bear the imprint of Christ's own rejection, faithfulness, and love, and because their gratitude at finding a new community reminds us of the treasure of the

community we've been given. This is the Christmas word for us all, the good news that set the sentinels singing: that our exile and rejection are ended, that our original destiny has been restored—to live in community with God and one another. The Christmas word isn't just a word about Jesus. The Christmas word is the word for us, the word that joins us to God and one another—which is the will of God.

So we are called to be a church that will not allow anyone to drift into exile or to be banished from the mercy of God. This is not just a matter of seeing that people are rescued from loneliness. It is also a matter of looking at the way our economic way of life drives the poor into exile and severs them from shelter, food, health care, dignity, and fellowship. It is also a season to consider how the whole system has driven us, too, into exile, away from the "gravity-driven love" C. S. Song describes into a life that draws our eyes to prettier things than the daily pain of our sisters and brothers scraping together an existence on the sidewalks of the city and in the garbage heap homes of the worldwide poor. On March 7, 2000, the Conference of Bishops of the ELCA published *A Pastoral Letter on Wealth and Poverty*. Part of this letter reads: "We are called to identify with those who live in poverty, welcome them into baptism's common water and to our Lord's table fellowship, and seek the well-being of our shared communities."

Perhaps Christmas Day is just the time to consider how to put flesh on the bones of this letter.

To consider:

The Coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a varnished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

—R. S. Thomas, in *H'M* (London: Macmillan, 1972) LAK

Faces

"And what did *you* get?" is the cry, as the gifts are unwrapped. Some are obvious, as soon as the paper is torn, while others take more examination before their worth is truly recognized. John's face we know, but whose is this other face? He is light, says John, and life and grace and truth. Jesus' face, says John, is the face of God in the flesh, living among us, and we have seen God's glory in him. PWR

First Sunday after Christmas December 31, 2000

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

On the surface of it, the theme of the Gospel is young Jesus, lost and found. But on second thought, it appears that Mary and Joseph—though Mary does all the talking!—were more lost than their missing son. They looked for Jesus in all the wrong places, or, at least, they looked for him in the places one might expect to find him if he weren't 12 years old . . . and "Son of the Most High" (1:32). They looked for him within the narrow confines of the extended family first, then in the pilgrims' caravan. Only then did they return to Jerusalem, and then it took them three days to find their son.

Did Mary and Joseph forget just for a moment that children grow up? Had things been so blessedly ordinary for so long—no more angels, adoring shepherds, and prophecies—that it seemed the earlier mysteries were a mistake or could have their implications indefinitely postponed? Had Jesus shown no signs of theological curiosity, so that his parents couldn't imagine their 12-year-old wanting to hang out in the Temple in earnest discussion with seasoned teachers?

We have some clues—thanks to Luke!—that Mary and Joseph either couldn't or didn't want to see, because those who selected today's pericopes pair the Gospel with a snippet from 1 Samuel. There we find a lovely story about Hannah visiting her son Samuel once a year when she and Elkanah arrive at the shrine at the time for sacrifice. However old Samuel was getting to be, Hannah, we're told, always made him "a little robe," a token of respect and affection from the mother who always saw him as the answer to her prayers.

But although Mary no doubt knew the story of Hannah and Samuel and had seen it repeated in her cousin Elizabeth's remarkable pregnancy, she had no distance when it came to Jesus. Eager to be a good mother, always pondering the events that led up to and followed Jesus' birth, Mary wasn't really wanting to "lend" Jesus to God, whether to keep her firstborn close to her or to delay the sword that Simeon announced would pierce her own heart.

So, in the exchange between Mary and Jesus (vv. 48–49), the two protagonists say some of the same words and speak the same language, but they mean very different things. When Mary asks, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety," Jesus responds, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know I must be in my Father's?" And, yes, that was no typographical error: the Greek *is* incomplete, leaving room to insert either "house" or "business."

Jesus and Mary also have two different ideas about who that Father is. So now the tension between Jesus, Son of Mary and Joseph, and Jesus, Son of God, begins to heighten. Oh, in the end, Jesus returns to Nazareth with his parents and is obedient to them. But now there can be no doubt that his primary concern is the will of the Most High and the mission that entails.

One further note about the parents' search (v. 46): There are intimations of resurrection here. Mary and Joseph search three days for Jesus. Jesus, dead and buried, is raised on the third day. The young Jesus is found in the Temple in Jerusalem. After the resurrection, there is a new temple, Christ's resurrected body.

But back to the story. In verses 51–52,

Jesus disappears back into the fabric of his hometown. Jesus, the wisdom of God, is for perhaps two more decades hidden in an out-of-the way place, far from the religious and political center, in the company of nobodies (by the standards of Jerusalem and Rome). There Jesus continues to increase "in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." This is the description of Jesus, but now it is the description of every child of God, of whatever age.

Jesus was Son of God, but God also had a role for Mary and Joseph, a key role in Jesus' development as a man of faith. And so it is today. Whenever a child is baptized, parents, godparents, and other caregivers, as well as the whole Christian community, promise to bring up that child to know God and to be acquainted with Scripture, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. So Christian education and Christian nurture become a vital act of stewardship.

To consider: If stewardship is indeed a lifestyle, how can we organize a stewardship emphasis around Christian education and Christian nurture? Could there be a little catechism of stewardship that parents and other caregivers teach or talk about around the dinner table or at family devotions each week? How could we invite children and youth to teach their elders about the stewardship life? And how can we encourage the participation of adults in the congregation in teaching, befriending, and praying for the younger members? Is this a Sunday to make a presentation of Bibles to children of the congregation? LAK

Faces

In the week after Christmas, we are confronted by our expectations for our holiday gifts, some met and some not, often leaving us bewildered, amazed, exhausted, delighted, disappointed, and more. So too with Luke, who shows us a mixed-up mix of faces and places: anxious parents and weary travelers on dusty roads, exhausted festival-goers and city merchants on the crowded post-celebration streets of Jerusalem, and finally in the temple, amazed teachers and a precocious 12-year-old boy. In the end, where's the real problem: with God's gift or our expectations? PWR

The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2000

Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12
Matthew 2:1–12

Faces

"What should we do?" the Magi asked one another. They knew the face of Herod's governing: manipulation, fear, and division. Surely he meant no good to this child to whom they had paid their homage. He would be a different ruler, who would draw together sons and daughters, nations and kings. They had found him, but having been warned in a dream the wise men went home by another way. As you read this, our elections are over, a new congress is settling in, a new president is on the way, and new faces dot the political landscape. But how will these rulers govern? More important, whose face will we seek, and which road will we choose to travel? PWR

The Baptism of Jesus January 7, 2001

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

First Reading

The Gospel of Luke invites us to pay attention to those who are always present but usually neglected. Yet the texts we explore during Epiphany are so familiar that we may have a hard time hearing a new word from them. In order to encounter the stories in a new way, I will explore them in light of the word offered in the psalms, texts which are almost always present in our liturgy but which are usually neglected or treated as our own songs rather than as the Word of God to us. We will attempt to listen to each psalm in its own right and then ask how it might give us new ears to hear of Jesus and the challenge he brings us.

Psalm 29 begins with an invitation to the highest heavenly beings or sons of gods to raise their voices in praise of the LORD. Their voices are to proclaim the strength and glory of God. Divine majesty and holy splendor are to be noted. In the third verse the psalmist shifts from their voices to God's. The divine voice is not a sweet whisper but more like the power of a thunderstorm. God's voice thunders over the waters. The voice is effective, robbing the towering trees of their power and sending mountains skipping like young animals. When God speaks the whole wilderness shakes. The divine voice speaks and chaos seems to come forth. Yet the LORD presides over what appears from the perspective of the wilderness to be chaos. Finally the psalmist speaks of his hope that this great and awesome strength of God will become a source of strength for God's own people. In the midst of chaos, God's voice may also be the source of peace.

When we return to the familiar story of the baptism of Jesus remembering the divine voice from the psalm, something of the power that falls upon Jesus strikes us. Within the Gospel of Luke, Jesus continually moves forth in power. What if we hear the voice from heaven not as the proud whisper of a dad acknowledging his child, but as the thundering voice that shakes the power of the high and mighty? In fact not only cedars split at the sound of this voice, but the heavens themselves are split open. If John the Baptist had thundered against the "great oaks," the One upon whom God's effective word descends would also challenge them. For the One coming after John is more powerful than he is. John's fate is already unfolding; he is locked up in Herod's prison and is not—in Luke—even there for Jesus' baptism. The voice from heaven thunders out the proclamation to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The voice thus assures him as he stands in the wilderness that if in the wake of John's arrest all seems chaos, God's final word has yet to be spoken. Jesus, the One who hears this voice, shall know that God is still enthroned in heaven and God's strength will also be given to him.

Pastoral Reflections

The psalm helps us to imagine the power within the tender words that God's speaks over Jesus at his baptism. It helps us to remember that the words spoken over us as we are baptized into Christ carry within them both gentleness and phenomenal strength. The psalmist and Isaiah present us with the tension implicit in the faithful Christian life. In the popular PBS series on Genesis, a Rabbi spoke pointedly about being created in the image of God while also being made of the earth. He suggested that

we should all carry around two cards in our pockets. On one is written, "God created the universe for you"; on the other, the reminder "You are dust." The Rabbi suggested that on days when we are totally beaten down, we need to read the first out loud to ourselves. But on days when we are thinking more of ourselves than we ought, the dusty note would serve us well.

In Jesus we overhear the blessing of God, which Christ has made our own blessing. The text from Isaiah speaks to us at our broken places, the days when we are a bruised reed at the point of breaking. The voice of God lifts up those whose courage falters: "You are mine, you are precious, I love you." In the psalm, we are reminded that the same voice thunders and breaks down those parts of our lives that block the fullness of the will of God and keep it from becoming manifest in our midst. This voice of power also blows against all who are arrogant and who rise up to destroy others. In the midst of the wilderness where all seems to be chaos, we are reminded that God is with us working transformation.

Think of three different people who will be listening in your congregation as you preach. Perhaps you will call to mind a third-grade girl, a businessman recently promoted, and a woman who has just been diagnosed with cancer. What elements does each need to hear from Isaiah? from the psalm? What is the old reality that God's voice will clear away so that a new word might be heard?

Now think of the congregation as a whole. Where does the thundering word need to sound in your life as a community? Are there groups of people whom you see yourselves towering over? Have you been enjoying the baptismal pool only for your private refreshment? Also, in what ways is your community longing for healing? Dare mention the broken places and offer them up to the healing power of God?

Finally, think of your own liturgical practice. Does the life of the community gathered around table and bath reflect the fact that God is a constant comfort in times of need but also that God is never simply a comfortable presence? How might this be revealed even more effectively? PRJ

Faces

"Who is this John?" the crowds by the river asked themselves. "Is he . . . ? Could he be . . . the *One*?" John heard the questions and bluntly put things in perspective, turning the crowd away from his gruff face toward the face of another. I'm not worthy, says John. The One is different. Me, I call for repentance and splash some water; the One who is coming clears out the silos, sifting wheat from chaff. Me, I plead; the One who is coming acts—and acts with power. Don't ask about me, says John, but ask about the One. PWR

Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 14, 2001

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

First Reading

In order to understand the section of the psalm assigned for today, we must at least glance at the psalm as a whole. The first four verses, all of which are cut out of today's assigned text, describe the ways of the wicked. Sin speaks in the wicked; they flatter, plot, and do not reject evil. They do not fear God but are set on a path of their own choosing. The psalmist is not merely

recording the observations of others; one senses a groan of his own. He has been prey to the mouths of mischief and deceit. If an organist were leading this part of the psalm, the deepest bass stop would be pulled out full.

In the context of this pain and shame, the psalmist raises the song of utter trust in the goodness of God. The groans which are known too well give way to joyous praise. The juxtaposition with the early verses gives solidity to this song of steadfastness. The one to whom the psalmist sings shifts as well. He no longer speaks to the gathered people of the tyranny on every side. Our singer turns and addresses the LORD whose love and faithfulness extends from the heights of the heavens to the depths of the seas. The salvation of God is great indeed, saving both human beings and animals. Having praised God as God is intrinsically, the psalmist then sings of God's goodness overflowing onto humanity. "All" are invited to take refuge in God. Food, drink, life and light are available in abundant measure. In verse 10, the psalmist asks that this may always be so. Then he confirms our initial suspicion that the groans were his own. He prays that the foot of his enemy may be taken off his throat and that God, rather than the enemy, will have the victory. The bright verses we are invited to sing today have peril and menace on both sides of them. Awareness of this context, lost in the lectionary, makes the light shine forth from the chosen portion even brighter.

What might this psalm open up for us in our reading of John's story? The lectionary sings of the abundance that God offers. But the omitted verses remind us that the abundance is so delicious because of the scarcity that threatens. No one will starve if Jesus does not act in Cana; but no doubt people will suffer. The shame of the miscarriage of hospitality will sting the bride and groom about to embark on new life. The whole family's reputation will be tainted by the memory of empty glasses too early in the party. John's story has no evil enemies plotting on their beds, but storm clouds are present. When Jesus responds to the shame lurking on the horizon, he is not subtle. When Jesus sees the shame that could overshadow this young couple's new life together he acts, big time. Six jars of fabulous wine are produced. And these are no one quart mason jars; Six "tanks" might be a better translation. This day will be remembered not with the wagging of heads about the family who did not properly prepare for the celebration but as the night when exquisite wine launched a party to beat all parties.

Pastoral Reflections

The reading of the psalm in its entirety invites us to remember that our experience of salvation often arises in the midst of its opposite. The abrupt change in the psalm from awareness of a world acting shamefully (v. 4) to an all-out singing of God's goodness (v. 5) is one known to our church members. Some experience it as they leave a family argument in their car and march directly into the opening hymn! The naming of the pain that threatens our people is the beginning of the overthrow of its power. The honest acknowledgment of the real shame we know too well is what gives weight to the novel, gracious way in which God treats us. Our awareness of scarcity accentuates the absolute abundance that God offers.

As suggested above, shame had threatened the wedding families. Shame is a dark cloud, fierce and threatening. I have been to weddings where the food runs out. Joy gives way to embarrassment; no one will die of hunger, but the celebration is undermined. Joyful laughter gives way to sneers. New life is clouded over.

In our lives together we have experienced this in more profound ways: the family that runs out of resources of love and cannot find a way forward together; the congregation so fearful of scarcity that they dole out God's grace in droplets. We find ourselves at the end of our own resources, fearful that the joy of new beginnings has ended before they even got started. When we have proven unable to clean up our own acts, Jesus comes. He turns the vessels of our futile attempts at cleansing into utterly grand resources that not only help us get by but open us up to abundance way beyond what we ever could imagine. The abundance he offers is so tremendous that many might caution the steward to ration it. Jesus goes too far, gives too much. Abuse of this gift seems inevitable. But is it? Conscious of the sheer and utter graciousness of God, might we not pass our own glasses to thirsty brothers and sisters around us? When we see that this party need never end, maybe we will even invite others to join us knowing that God is good enough to care for all. The awareness that things could have been otherwise makes the newness that much richer. If Jesus had shown up at the beginning of this story with wine bottles as gifts, the story would never have been retold. As the psalmist's praise grows in the face of adversity, God's grace seems more gracious still when scarcity and shame are present and then banished by the divine act of giving. Jesus comes to us in a supper to turn us from the threats around us and within us toward the abundance of his celebration.

Let the means of his gracious coming show the abundance of his love clearly this week. At your celebration of the Lord's Supper, let the loaf be generous and the wine be the best you can find. Offer up healthy handfuls of bread and fill the cup to the brim. Be as extravagant as the grace that is offered. PRJ

Faces

"Why are you telling me this?" It's a simple question that Jesus asks of his mother, and one a clergy friend once confided to me was the secret to sorting out the many demands of ministry, the secret to keeping appropriate boundaries, the secret to staying sane as a pastor. Is this truly my role, my task, or is something else going on here? But Mary turns to face the servants, the chief steward faces the bridegroom, and Jesus' glory is revealed in the release of a truly divine vintage of wine. Where there is need, says Mary (prodding her son), there too is God. You can see it on their faces, transfigured by a sip of fine wine. PWR

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 21, 2001

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

First Reading

Psalm 19 begins by recognizing the voiceless testimony that creation offers. All of creation—both the heavens and the earth—tell of the glory of God in speechless (v. 3) speech (v. 2). The first three verses announce this wonder in very general terms such as "heavens" and "firmament." The second half of the fourth verse then shifts to more specific examples of this witness. The sun proclaims the glory of God in the way it moves with such orderliness and thoroughness. Its arc spans all of the known world; its heat warms all without exception.

The psalmist then moves from praise of the orderliness of natural phenomena to praise of the Torah which orders human

ways. The Torah revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes. As God guides the sun on its path, God through the Torah guides and governs human interactions. And this guidance is to be sought above all else, for it is sweeter than honey and offers greater riches than gold.

Finally the psalmist asks the question, "Who can detect error in the decrees of the LORD?" The answer is surely, "None." And so the psalmist turns to God, asking for God to guide him in particular. Teach me, oh LORD! He has followed the path of the sun and it has led him to reflect on his own journey. Just as the firmament depends on God for its ways, the psalmist throws himself on God. His last plea is that his words and thoughts be pleasing to God. From the general flow of the cosmos to the specific direction of his daily life, the LORD alone is the key.

If the psalm moved us from cosmic generalities to God's specific means of the Torah, the Gospel lesson fills out in greater specificity the content of Torah. Jesus, in obedience to the law, has gone to the synagogue to reflect on the law. This, we are told, was his custom. He reads from the prophet Isaiah about the Lord's anointed one. God's governance sets these specific priorities: preaching good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the coming of the jubilee year. How do the sacred writings teach us to live? This is God's curriculum! To follow it is to taste sweetness beyond that of honey and to know wealth beyond that of gold.

Jesus then takes it all one step deeper into the concrete, proclaiming that the prophet's programmatic agenda has been fulfilled in his preaching, in his person. In the Gospel of Luke, this mini-sermon sets the agenda for the ministry of Jesus. His words and meditations will be pleasing in God's sight. He will embody God's way of governing in his life, ministry, death and resurrection.

Pastoral Reflections

This is a good time to invite the people of God to think about the ministry of Jesus—and thus of our ministry—in the context of the whole salvation history of God. Throughout the Scriptures God acts with consistency, and the text from Isaiah gives clear images of the shape of God's governance. You might recall specific stories of God's action throughout Scripture: the election of Sarah and Abraham in their old age, the rescue from Egypt, the coming into the land, the return from exile, and the voice of the prophets continually calling the people to a faithfulness that is ordered like the sermon of Jesus.

You might also move from this agenda for God's anointed one into the life and ministry of Jesus. Recall key moments which we will be exploring throughout this year in Luke where Jesus lives out the prophet's declaration. For Jesus, the Gospel is not something to be kept for himself but rather is to be lived out for others. In fact, in this text the phrase "bring good news" is not a verb with an object. Rather all is verb. Rendered literally in English, it would be something like "good-news-ing." The gospel is not a thing we possess but a dynamic that takes possession of us and carries us along in the broad sweep of God's glorious action.

Invite your congregation to think and live in this way. Look around your neighborhood. Who are the poor? the captives? the blind? the oppressed? What would it mean for us to be involved in a redistribution of goods so that all had a stake in the economic order? What would it mean for us to live out the gospel as a verb?

Think about the ministry that is already happening in your parish. In what ways do you also see the inbreaking of God's governance among you? Are there places where the priorities outlined in Isaiah and embodied in Jesus are still being practiced in your midst? Recall others who have sought to embody this word as well. An obvious example is Dr. Martin Luther King, whose day will be celebrated around the country on Monday. In what ways did he do the good news?

As I write this I also know that a new president will have announced his agenda on Saturday at his inauguration. Without telling people the answer, ask them if the chief priorities of our new president resonate with God's way of governing. Where do those priorities go a different direction? Read the Isaiah text again so that God's priorities might be heard again in the context of this question.

If you do not already do this, the psalmist's prayer in verse 14 would be a very appropriate way to begin either worship or the sermon this day: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." PRJ

Faces

Every face turned to look at Jesus, every eye followed his every move, even after he sat down. He spoke of good news, of release from prison, of recovery of sight, of freedom for the oppressed. He spoke of jubilee, not down the road sometime but right here and right now. No wonder everyone was looking at him. What will you say, what will you offer, when every face turns to look at you? PWR

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany January 28, 2001

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

First Reading

The psalmist comes to us today singing as an old man who stands near the end of his days. He recalls how God has been faithful to him throughout all the years of his life. He gives thanks to the God who was with him in his youth and prays that God's faithfulness might continue to be present even now that his hair is turning gray (v. 18). His relationship with God strikes me as like that of an elderly couple who have known each other long and well. He is in great need and does not feel the need to move through common rituals of cordiality with God. After a brief confession that God is his refuge, he moves right into petitions for rescue and deliverance. The evil doers are grasping him, and he cries out to his companion of many years for help. Verses 1–4 entail that plea. In verse 5, "for" gives his first motivation for turning to God: for the LORD is his only hope. Verse 7 returns to his complaint and request for help, followed by another "for," the negative motivation for his crying out: for his enemies are pursuing him. Positive trust in God is expressed in the face of the evil deeds of his enemies. God's goodness is embraced in the presence of its opposite.

The rest of the psalm (well beyond the assigned lectionary portion) remembers God's trustworthiness in the past and with thanksgiving praises God for future encounters. So firm is the well-aged faith of the psalmist that he declares both the past and future faithfulness of God with equal confidence!

Many images that the psalmist uses in this song gain new meaning when thought of in terms of the life of Jesus: the one who was seized, who was called God-forsaken (v. 11), but whom God brings up again from the depths of the earth (v. 20). We need not read this as predictive of what would someday happen in the life of Jesus; since God is consistently faithful (as we discussed last week), words spoken over one follower will often resonate in another time and place with the life of another.

Jesus in the gospel is not the old man of the psalm. He never does reach such an age. Yet he faces his antagonists with a trust that appears well aged. Jesus stands in this text within the tense rhythm of human rejection yet trust in God. At first it looks like both God and humanity will smile upon Jesus and his message. They think well of him. But quickly their pleasure gives way to doubts. Isn't this Joseph's son? Who does he think he is? A good storyteller would help the congregation hear the sneer and rejection in this simple observation. Without that, the retort of Jesus comes out of nowhere. In the face of the contempt bred of familiarity, Jesus points out that those outside of the family may be touched by God's governance before the hometown crowd is. It wouldn't be the first time that those closest to God missed hearing the good news.

In their violent response, we hear the future that snarls at Jesus. They take him to the edge of a hill to execute him. But to borrow a phrase from John's Gospel a few weeks ago, his "time has not yet come." With the confidence of well-aged faith, he walks through the crowd unharmed . . . for now.

Pastoral Reflections

This Gospel text should not be a motive to point to Jesus' people back there in Nazareth and shake our heads at their unbelief. Ernst Käsemann once correctly proclaimed, "What gives most trouble to Christians of all epochs is neither lack of faith nor excess of criticism; it is Jesus himself, who bestows freedom so openhandedly and dangerously on those who do not know what to do with it."

This is what happens in the Gospel lesson, and what also happens so often in the church in every age including our own. Jesus comes to us and offers us freedom from the ways that we have lived. We are accustomed to being with people of our own economic level, and he calls us into the freedom of being with the poor. We are accustomed to locking up those whom we judge guilty, but he declares release to captives. He invites us to give sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed, and to participate in the coming of the jubilee year. When we are unmoved by his words and his vision, we find that we are held captive to the ways things have always been, stuck in the old, unable to participate in the new which he proclaims.

But what if we listened to his words and ventured out in trust? What if we risked leaving the security of what we have always been and walked into the new way to which God is calling us? Imagining what such a community of faith might look like would be a step in the right direction. Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, forms a community that pays attention to those ignored by the world. He speaks of living by mercy as God is first merciful to us. He invites us into a jubilee situation where all have enough and none is in need. He calls us to the courage to model our own lives after the grace that God so abundantly offers us. He woos us into a celebration where lost children are found again. He invites us to see Lazarus at our gate and to become his friend.

If we could follow Jesus as he walks through our midst and take a new direction from his way of walking, then we, like the psalmist, could proclaim in our old age that

the One who was faithful to us in our youth will walk with us to the end. And even this end would be but a new beginning where the hopes we knew partially fulfilled in this life—captives freed, oppressed relieved, a totally acceptable year of the Lord—would be all in all. PRJ

Faces

"He doesn't *look* like a prophet," said the hometown crowd, speaking of the familiar son of the local carpenter. But then again, this crowd isn't too good at spotting prophets. Expectations get in the way, and prejudices cloud the eyes. Widowed foreigners and outcast outsiders do a much better job, because they have neither time nor energy for illusions, rhetoric, and pride. *They* can spot the prophets . . . but how about you and the folks in your town? How good are your eyes? PWR

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 4, 2001

Psalm 138
Isaiah 6:1–8 [9–13]
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Luke 5:1–11

First Reading

The psalmist who wrote Psalm 138 sings with abandon. He launches into praise and thanksgiving to God "with his whole heart" (v. 1). The result is a psalm with unbounded, unbroken praise of the God who has heard him his whole life through. No complaint. No enemies pressing in. Nothing for the lectionary to seek to exorcise from the text. Full-mouthed praise of God from beginning to end. As a result of God's protection, his soul has grown stronger and stronger.

In verse 4 the psalmist expresses a hope which could only come to the imagination through fervent faith. He envisions a day when all the kings of the earth will join in this praise that he is raising. Looking around Israel, caught between the superpowers of Babylon and Egypt, this prospect is unlikely. Yet the psalmist dares to hope for such a day. The content of the song that the kings of the earth will sing is equally surprising. They will raise their voices to the God who looks on the lowly and who is only seen from a distance by the haughty who will not go to the lowly neighborhood.

Finally, in verse 7 the psalmist speaks of the confidence that he will have in God, come what may. In trouble, in the face of enemies, he will not fear, for he knows that God is with him.

In the Gospel text for today, Jesus is drawing huge crowds. Here is a leader who is Godlike as defined by the psalm. He is not merely one who exercises power, he is one who regards the lowly and walks among them. Pressed by the crowds, he gets into Simon's boat. This is not his first time meeting Simon. He has already met him and brought healing to his mother-in-law in the previous chapter of Luke. After Jesus has finished speaking, he turns to those who have so graciously offered him hospitality in their boat. Of course, this carpenter giving advice to fishermen about how to fish would have rubbed against the grain. They had been practicing their craft all night without luck. Yet they have seen his authority in healings, exorcisms, and teaching, so they listen to him. In the fishing tale to beat all fishing tales, they catch so many fish after listening to Jesus that their boat and that of their companions almost sink.

Simon Peter is so moved by this show of power that he responds as one would to a king, exclaiming that he does not deserve to be in his presence and belittling himself as a

person: "I am a sinful man." In Luke's telling we have never left the boat, and so Simon Peter is groveling at the feet of Jesus apparently through this slew of flopping fish. Yet Jesus acts in a way that is uncharacteristic of powerful men. He lifts Peter out of the fish frenzy and tells him not to fear. He lifts Peter up and, looking at him eye to eye, demonstrates that his way of ruling is not like that of other rulers. He winks at Peter, in my imagination, and tells him he ain't seen nothin' yet. Jesus cares for the needs of these fishers; they after all are not out fishing to get away from work, but are doing the labor that feeds their families. Jesus lifts them up and sets them to work in a mission much larger than they had ever imagined. They are to fish for humanity with Jesus as their guide; and as he has filled their boats with fish, he shall also bring their evangelical labors to abundant ends. They will learn of God's faithfulness first hand so that their voices might join with the praise and confidence of that earlier psalmist.

Pastoral Reflections

The joy of the spiritual life which the psalmist expresses comes to us through constant encounters with the One who meets us at our points of deepest need. He comes to heal us, to cast out our demons, to teach us. He provides for our needs with an incredible abundance. Like the tanks of wine at Cana, the food he supplies us with is ridiculously generous. Jesus comes and meets us where we are, at our low points, even when we cry out, "Depart from me, God."

Yet God is not one to take orders from us as though we set the direction for his actions toward us. He comes like God in Monte Python's *Holy Grail* and calls us by name, adding, "Stop your groveling." For God is no more pleased with the soul groveling over its own sinfulness than with the haughty of heart. Both are focused upon themselves.

God comes to lift up our eyes to see the larger picture of what God is up to in our midst. Jesus comes to earth and meets us eye to eye so that we might see with utter clarity the character of God. God is not one who looks upon the value of human beings as the powerful of the world do. With divine gracious gaze, with voice calling our names, with hand uplifting, God raises us out of ourselves, helps us to know who and whose we are, causes us to see ourselves in the light of God's own loving gaze.

And in this name calling, this gracious gaze, the uplifting, comes our calling, that we might see not only ourselves but the whole world through God's eyes, and that, seeing with new eyes, we might also sing with new voices, announcing with our whole hearts the wonder of a God who "though on high, regards the lowly, but the haughty perceives from far away." We join our hearts and voices to that of the psalmist singing with unbounded, unbroken praise to the God who has heard us our whole life through.

May our song reach to the ends of the earth, that even the kings of earth might praise you, O LORD! PRJ

Faces

"If you say so," said Simon to Jesus, probably rolling his eyes, curling his lip, or maybe tossing a wink to James and John. "All night long we've used all our fishing wisdom and skills, honed lo these many years, but if *you* say so, we'll cast our nets one more time." Their eyes soon bulged, though, at the amazing catch of fish, and bulged even wider as they turned to Jesus once more. There's wisdom and then there's wisdom, it seems. Even skilled anglers can learn a thing or two, no matter how much you roll your eyes, no matter how long you've been fishing, and no matter what you're fishing for. PWR

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany February 11, 2001

Psalm 1
Jeremiah 17:5–10
1 Corinthians 15:12–20
Luke 6:17–26

First Reading

The first psalm in the Psalter avoids many items which we have heard in other psalms this season. No complaints are raised. The world operates as it should. The righteous are happy, or better, blessed; the wicked are blown away. The situation is going so well that the LORD is not invoked or spoken to directly as in the other psalms we have explored.

The song begins by identifying the blessed in terms of three things they do not do. They do not follow the advice of the wicked, take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers. Then it speaks of what positively identifies the blessed: they delight and meditate in the LORD's law. Thus they are like trees planted by water; they prosper in all they do. This is then placed in contrast to the fate of the wicked. They will not endure but will be blown away. They will not stand when judgment comes.

The reason for the blessedness is to be found in the LORD who watches over those who walk in the way of righteousness. Interestingly, the LORD is the assurance of future blessedness, but we are not told that the LORD is the avenger against the wicked. Rather, "The way of the wicked will perish." It is almost as if their decision to walk outside of God's way will cause the weight of the evil deeds to collapse of their own accord.

The introductory "Blessed" and this focus on two distinct ways of living before God relate directly with the Gospel lesson for today. Here we see what had been announced by Jesus earlier being fulfilled "today." Jesus is preaching good news to the poor. Those of us who are not poor, but who overhear him, will have a harder time taking this as good news. He does not, like Matthew's Jesus, speak only of blessedness. The blessed are directly contrasted with a set of woes. Nor can we move to a quick spiritualizing of the texts. I had a friend who said, "When I turned forty I quit being subtle because I realized no one was getting it." Likewise Jesus does not risk subtlety. We cannot help but "get it" in Luke's Gospel.

The first three verses speak of reversal. The poor will have an inheritance; the hungry will be filled; the grieving will laugh; the persecuted are rewarded. And this string is contrasted with those who are now in the opposite situation: the rich, the full, the laughing, the admired. And their fate too shall be reversed with dire consequences. Jesus has again laid out God's agenda, God's kind of governance, and, once again, as in the psalm, two ways of being in the world are set in stark contrast. Jesus does not make any distinctions between wealth gained by deceit and that gained otherwise. Nor is there a distinction between the deserving poor and those who are lazy or immoral or other such criteria we commonly apply. God's agenda strives for that jubilee year, and that means radical change.

Pastoral Reflections

This text would be easy to proclaim as good news if our congregations were comprised largely of the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the persecuted. And for some of us these blessed of God might indeed fill our sanctuaries. For all of us some of these will probably be among us. Yet, I suspect that for most of those who read this reflection,

that is not the predominant situation. Although there are gray areas, if we had to place ourselves and our members only in one category or the other, woe to us.

This means that good news to the poor may be hard to hear as good news for us. The same word that might bring immense comfort to the hungry sounds like defiant challenge to the rest of us. I find myself wanting to protest vigorously that this is not fair! What happened to the One who turns water into wine? What happened to the One who filled a couple of boats with enough fish to feed everyone in the area? I thought that God's hand opens so that all are fed! If God is so all-out generous by God's very nature, then why should there ever be a situation where the blessing is partial, parceled out, instead of embracing all?

In the midst of these complaints, a reversal does indeed occur! I suddenly am turned back by God to the inequalities and injustice around me and am forced to look at those who stand outside of the circle of my own abundance. God protests our ordinary way of arranging the world. "Since I do give so abundantly," thunders God, "then why are so many hungry? Since by my very nature I am all-out generous, then why are you so miserly with sharing the blessings that you have? If there should be enough blessing to go all the way around, then why is your circle drawn so narrowly? If you want me to be committed to all, why does your commitment end so close to home?"

Confronted with the questions of God's governance and our own, we may be open to seeking a new way. We may finally be ready to ask whose advice we should follow and whose we should not. We may be ready to tread a new path, to live a new way. We may choose to sit in a new place. While this may not seem like good news to us, that may only be because we do not really trust the all-out generosity of God. Yet we are invited to delight in God's way and to be watered by the streams of life. We are cultivated so that we might bear fruit and come to believe that God knows what is best for us.

Brought to such a place we can at last believe that jubilee—a redistribution of all so that all might have life—is good news not only for the poor, but for us all, that when we have abandoned our clinging and our laughing and our well-spread table, we shall delight in greater things than these. PRJ

Faces

Jesus looked out, not just at the air or the clouds, but at his hearers, his followers, his friends. He looked at them, with all their troubles and fears, all their hopes and dreams written on their faces. They looked to him, they looked at him, they looked at *his* face for healing and comfort and power. Eye to eye, face to face, the preacher and people met as words of blessing and woe filled the air between them. Eye to eye, face to face, preachers and people still meet, to catch a glimpse of the face of Jesus, the face of God. PWR

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany February 18, 2001

Psalm 37:1–12, 41–42 (1–11, 39–40 NRSV)
Genesis 45:3–11, 15
1 Corinthians 15:15:35–38, 42–50
Luke 6:27–38

First Reading

Our piece of a psalm for the day is from a song structured as an acrostic, where each letter of the Hebrew alphabet launches another couplet. The effect of this technique is to suggest the completeness and consistency of God's ways; the LORD's ways are praised from A to Z. This is totally lost, of course, in translation. Even if the translators had engaged in the word choice gymnastics that would have translated the acrostic into some English equivalent, our lectionary would only have given us A through H plus Z. Thus the message of consistency is banished. Yet given the repeating themes throughout the psalms, its parsing may lose something in form but little in the way of content. The missing verses are variations of those we do get to hear. We sing that we should not fret over the apparent prosperity of the wicked but trust in God who will bring their days to an end. Do not envy those who are wicked, for envy may cause you to be pulled into their wicked ways. When all is said and done, God is the One who deserves praise, who rescues and saves. This text connects with last week's Gospel with its reoccurring theme that the meek, the blessed, the righteous will inherit the land (vv. 11, 22, 29).

The connection between the wisdom found in this psalm and that of the Gospel is direct. Both counsel the attitude that we are to have in the face of our enemies. Jesus is continuing his sermon on the plain. Having noted that the world is indeed violently divided, he turns to the blessed and says, "But. . . ." Do not take God's future into your hands by responding violently, anticipating the judgment of God. Yet this is not a call to allow further dehumanization of those future blessed but rather a description of how to be human in the governance of God. Echoing a theme from our psalm, Jesus teaches those who suffer at the hands of the rich not to be pulled into their wicked ways.

The role that this text has played in the practice of nonviolent resistance suggests that this is not a call to passivity. Martin Luther King and others like him come to mind as they have returned again and again to this text (or its equivalent in Matthew) to set their project on its way. In the face of those who would rob the poor of everything they have, including not only their material goods but their dignity and self-determination, Jesus tells them to assert their dignity by showing that they already are living in a different kind of governance, that which is brought to them by God. In the face of those who know only how to take, Jesus counsels them to offer themselves as a gift. Gifts are not taken, they are given. A degree of gracious self-determination exposes the wickedness of those who know only how to rob. Jesus shows a still more excellent way.

In God's way of ruling the world, mercy and forgiveness reign. To love only in expectation of some return, "What credit is that to you?" The word translated by the NRSV "credit" is *charis* or "grace." A somewhat free translation of this would be, "What's the grace in that for you?" To choose only a life of calculated investment and return, what is the grace in that? To let the violence suffered determine the nature of your response, what is the grace of that? Having met Jesus, and having seen the depth of his practice of these very verses to the end

of his life in a public execution, one cannot help but see that he does offer a still more excellent way.

Pastoral Reflections

As with the text from last week, the danger is that those of us who are rich, full, and satisfied now will mishear Jesus again. We may not allow that reversal of last week to happen to our perception but rather use this text to demand submission of those who are poor, hungry, grieving, and persecuted. Those who unreflectively benefit from institutionalized violence such as that which maintains the poor in their poverty have no right to demand that the survivors of that violence renounce counterviolence. What would be the grace in that? If we have trouble loving the enemies of our own making, then how can we call on others to Jesus' still more excellent way?

Yet, having said that, when others have taken it upon themselves to love those who persecute them, we are indeed deeply moved. We see the grace in their lives and are invited to walk in this excellent way. A true story may help to clarify this. Eminent moralist Robert Coles tells the story of Ruby Bridges, a little girl who put him on a new path.

Six-year-old Ruby was one of the first black children to be sent by a judge's order to a school in New Orleans that had previously been all white. You may recall the Norman Rockwell drawing of her walking between two federal marshals. Each day she faced the mobs of people cursing her with every obscenity in the book. She would enter the school under police protection, and all alone—for the parents did not want her to corrupt their dear children—she diligently learned how to read, write and do her arithmetic. One day as she faced the angry mob her teacher noticed that she said something to them. But when Miss Hurley asked Ruby about this, she denied that she had said anything to them. "But I saw your lips move, Ruby." "I wasn't talking to them. I was praying for them." "For them?" "Yes, don't you think they need our prayers?" "What did you pray for?" "I pray what Jesus did for his enemies. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"

No one could have properly demanded of Ruby that she so pray for that vicious mob. Yet she had been brought to worship each week. She had met One who declared her blessed, and she was caught up in his way of governing the world; she knew a divine love that brought her into a new way. She had walked in a more excellent way, and what grace there was in that! She invites us to see the limitations of our self-chosen paths and to walk with her and her Lord in a new, delightful, and blessed way. (The story of Ruby Bridges can be found in Robert Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* [New York: Scholastic, 1995.]) PRJ

Faces

The faces don't match today: enemies are greeted by blessings, beggars receive twice what they had hoped, and the ungrateful receive kindness. We are so used to matching and mirroring the faces around us—scowl for scowl and smile for smile—that we are taken aback at these mismatches. But that's how God is, says Jesus. Offering mercy in place of vengeance and love in response to hatred, God fights back, blow for blow, in God's own unexpected fashion. All this, said Luther, God does out of divine goodness and mercy, "without any merit or worthiness on my part." "Take *that*," says Jesus, and Jesus' *that* makes all the difference. This is most certainly true, indeed. PWR

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 25, 2001

Psalm 99
Exodus 34:29–35
2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2
Luke 9:28–36 [37–43]

First Reading

Psalm 99 is a royal psalm extolling the greatness of the LORD as king over all. The LORD is a mighty God enthroned above all people. Proper contemplation of this God would have us shaking in our boots. This is no small God but the one who sits enthroned over the entire cosmos.

Given that this is the case, the psalmist invites all the people of the earth to praise the awesome, holy name of God. Then the psalmist turns from proclamation and invitation to speech directed to God. Calling God "Mighty King," he qualifies God' kingship by addressing God as "lover of justice." And he says, "you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness" (v. 4). Then he turns back to the congregation and calls on them to join him in praising God.

Praise gives way to remembrance that God has listened to those who have listened to him: Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. He spoke and they followed. Up looks the psalmist and praises God again for being a forgiving God who also makes right what is wrong. Finally, the psalmist turns one last time toward the gathered community and invites them to continue their praise of this awesome God.

The royal psalms are often brought out on the more spectacular festivals of the church year. Today is no exception. With the transfiguration of Jesus, we sing praise to the royalty of the God known in Christ. We have a Gospel story with two episodes, but it is one story. Both the mountain top and the demon confrontation speak of the glory of God.

Jesus is up on the mountain with a select group of disciples. Moses, that other biblical mountain man, and Elijah, no stranger to mountains himself, join Jesus. They hold a conversation about Jesus' upcoming departure or, literally, his "exodus" (see the Greek). As happens so often in the Scriptures, the glory of God is bound not only to God's utter ontological difference from us but in God's opting to be in liberating relationship with us. As a cloud descends, God speaks in majesty echoing words we heard thunder at the beginning of Epiphany. But this time the message is not just for Jesus but for all present. God speaks not to Jesus with a "You" but to the select group who see the revelation of glory. "This is my Son, my Chosen." And then the payoff of this statement: "Listen to him." This glimpse of awesome glory allows the disciples to know that Jesus is the one to whom they should pay attention. Yet such glory as they have seen is not the primary vision of glory which that God would have them see. It opens up their knowing so that they see the hand of God in all that Jesus does and says and suffers.

They come down off the mountain not to abandon glory but to know it more fully. As with the exodus, the glory of God is finally known not in isolated moments of ecstasy but in the midst of daily life. The God who is so distant and other deems it right to draw near to us that new life might be ours. As Jesus heads for his "exodus," he reveals that the glory of God is the liberated human being. The glory of God is what we have been witnessing this whole season, not primarily on mountain tops, but on the plain and at the sea. The glory of God is the poor being blessed, the hungry being filled, the

weeping turned to rejoicing, the persecuted welcomed. The glory of God is that the creator and sustainer of the universe is the "lover of justice" who has come down to be with the suffering people that they might experience exodus anew.

Pastoral Reflections

The voice of God bids us to listen to Jesus. We have during this Epiphany season sought to listen to his teaching even when the words seemed harsh to us at first reading. Jesus comes and bids us to follow in the way he has trod. He invites us to experience the glory of God not in moments of ecstasy, though those may be given to us when we least expect them, but in life on the plain. In plain moments of life God becomes known to us through healing and liberation.

Luther warned about seeking God in high and mighty places; he said that looking up for God is like sawing above our heads. It is highly ineffective and ends up blinding us with sawdust. Rather look to know God where God has chosen to be known: in the fragile child at Mary's breast, knee deep in a pile of fish in a fisherman's boat, talking to us about the poor, the hungry, and the persecuted. The encounters with Jesus in the plain moments of life may be the most glorious of all.

Jesus comes as the embodiment of God's glory, as mercy incarnate. He comes to rearrange our lives so that we might taste the delight of the LORD. The table he sets is one where all are invited, beginning with those whose stomachs growl the loudest. Seeing the alternative he offers, perhaps our own hunger will grow. And we will allow Jesus' vision of God's governance to rule over us in our strength and in our weakness. This jubilee experience is the "exodus" that Jesus is preparing for us; and if Jesus is throwing this party, why would we not run to it in trust? PRJ

Faces

His face *changed*, says Luke, just when folks were getting used to it. Jesus was fast becoming an old friend to the disciples, but even old friends can surprise you. In the midst of prayer, his face suddenly looked different. His clothes were dazzling, and his face . . . it was *glorious*. Suddenly, all the pieces of Jesus came together—the teaching, the healing, the praying—and that glory, God's glory, was all the disciples could see. For one terrifyingly wonderful, glorious moment, everything fit, and it changed the ones who witnessed it. Seeing God does that to people—it did it to Moses and Peter on their mountains long ago and does it to preachers and people in our worship today. Just when you think you know some *One*. . . . PWR

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