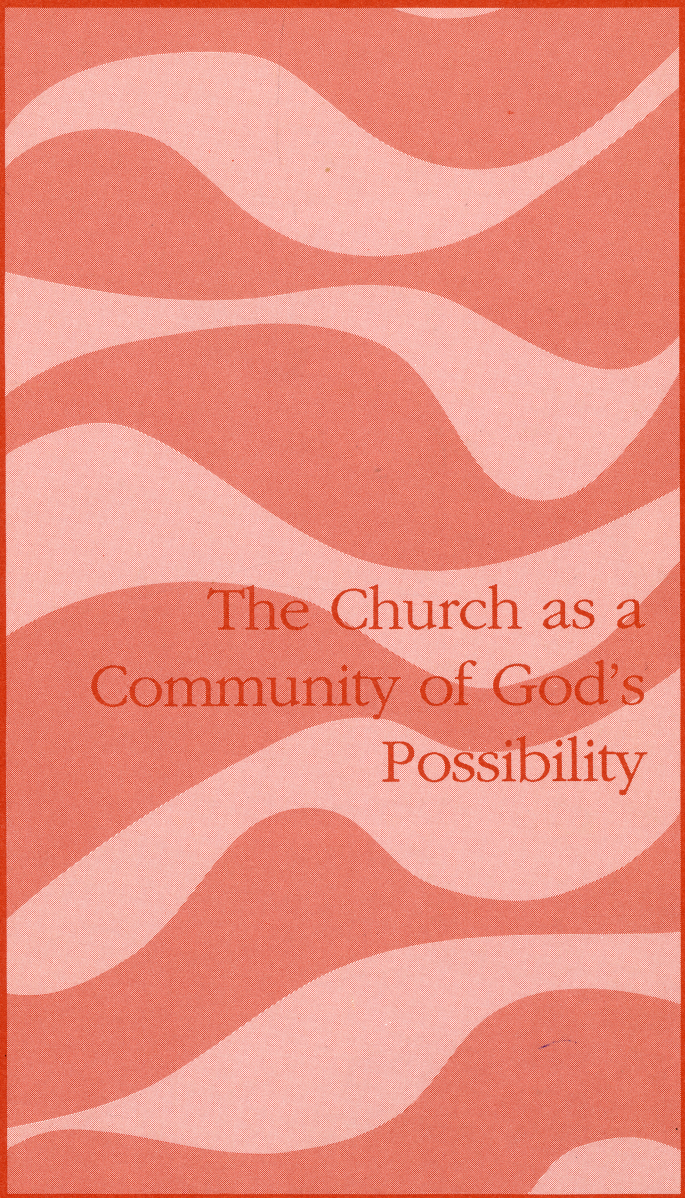
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The Church as a Community of God's Possibility

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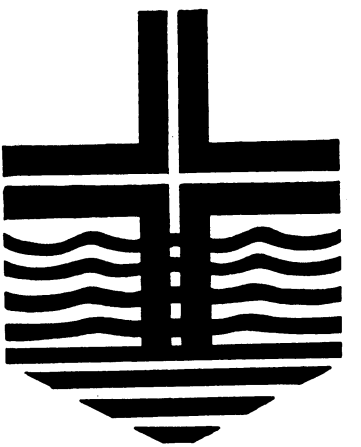
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The Church as a Community of God's Possibility

The essays in this issue of *Currents* were the Hein Fry lectures of 1996. Their author is **Philip Hefner**, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Beginning in 1997, *Currents* agreed to publish the Hein Fry lectures that are delivered annually at the eight ELCA seminaries, and we are most pleased to be able to publish in addition these wide-ranging essays by Professor Hefner from a year before our agreement with the ELCA's Division for Ministry began since they deal with crucial ecclesiological issues of the present and the future.

These essays and the Preaching Helps by **Paul Bauermeister** add up to more pages than usual, which means that you get an extra bonus without extra cost. We believe you will find the essays and the sermonic helps to be meaty, but not difficult; we suspect you will want to interrupt your reading of the Hefner essays frequently to ask: Is that the way I experience the church? What is my hope for the church of the 21st century? What would be my counter proposal? How does all this shape and transform the church's mission?

In "The Church as Well of Possibility," Hefner sets forth a concept of transformation as the central image of God's work for us as individual Christians and as the church. Such transformation is rooted in God, and in the freedom, intentionality, and love of God that we find in Jesus Christ. Each writing in the New Testament aims at the transformation of the reader, and Eastern theology proposes that a human being is not fully what God intends it to be until it is transformed to share fully in God's intended fulfillment of the creation. In the church we are in the process of becoming something whose outcome and aim we cannot fully comprehend. If we wish to relate the church to salvation, we will focus on the church as this community of possibility and transformation, where God's hopes and the world's hopes interface. Our plurality in backgrounds, worship, and in reading the Bible feed into our diversity, and our diversities constitute a symphony of identities whose possibilities God is calling forth in our midst as we undergo the transformations that God's future requires. Transformation is the process by which God works to

bring forth the future possibilities of our past, since that past bears our identity, as it has unfolded up to this moment.

In a second essay, "The Community of Possibility: Belonging without Conditions," Hefner explores the unquenchable yearning for unity in the church despite the fragmentation caused by technology and the intensification of pluralism. Nature is a dimension of that to which we belong without condition, but there is also a sociocultural belonging that is shaped by multiculturality and social ministry. We seek an unconditional belonging to one another though that goal is threatened by barriers of economic and social class and by the diversities of our personal identities. Pastors are caught in the tension between their duty to model the public philosophy and morality of the ELCA and their duty to minister to persons who are not able to conform to that philosophy and morality. In the 16th century, Article VII of the Augsburg Confession was a force in behalf of diversity. When Lutherans have faced churchly groups other than the Roman Catholic Church, however, this same confessional article has actually sanctioned Lutheran refusal to recognize church communities that did not conform to their understanding of faith. Homogeneous communities cannot proclaim and practice belonging without conditions. The community of belonging without conditions is the human impossibility in which God's possibilities for humans can be actualized.

The final essay, "The Demographics of Possibility: People's Church," brings us to Hefner's real vision of the church for the 21st century. That community is the people's church when it carries the material and spiritual coherence of its people and interprets that in terms of recognizable Christian symbols. There is a built-in tension between the Big Story and the little stories of the faith. The Big Story is the fundamental narrative of the Christian faith that governs the identity of our church as church and aims to provide the largest interpretation of every Christian's life. Individuals and particular communities tell their little stories, which give expression to their own concrete experience. Communities of faith insist that their little stories be acknowledged as standing in positive relationship to the Big Story. If the Epistle of James is not joined in an intrinsic manner to the Epistle to the Romans, for example, the Lutheran story cannot be the Big Story for African Americans. In many respects the ELCA is an elite church (sophisticated theology, worship, music, ecumenical relations), but there is also a strong stream of the people's church in the ELCA (diversity in training for the pastorate, mission goals of inclusiveness and evangelism, negativity toward the churchwide offices, erosion of our theological consensus). In the people's church "little people" are waging a strenuous effort for their stories to be acknowledged within the

Big Story of the time. The Spanish term *mestizaje* (great mixing) describes well the interaction between the little stories of the people and the Big Story of the church.

These few summary remarks do not begin to comprehend the feast on the church that Philip Hefner has cooked up for us in these essays. But I hope they are enough of an appetizer for you to want to take and eat. Hefner is well aware that ELCA's trajectory toward becoming "people's church" evokes both applause and protests, contented stomachs and heartburn. The ELCA will survive well into the 21st century if it learns from its tensions and paradoxes so that all of it can be transformed by God's actions in Jesus Christ into a real people's church for all the people of God. To accomplish that the ELCA must be both a place of unconditional belonging and a place to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow.

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

The Church as Well of Possibility

Philip Hefner
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The guiding image for these lectures

In describing his own art, the poet A. R. Ammons articulates the image that guides my thinking about the church in these 1996 Hein-Fry Lectures.[1]

> I look for the way
> things will turn
> out spiralling from a center,
> the shape
> things will take to come forth in:
>
> I look for the forms
> things want to come as
>
> from what black wells of possibility,
> how a thing will
> unfold:
>
> not so much looking for the shape
> as being available
> to any shape that may be
> summoning itself
> through me
> from the self not mine but ours.

I have a deep confidence in the church, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and my confidence rests on the conviction that by the grace of God the Holy Spirit the church is a well of possibility. It is appropriate for a well of possibility, as Ammons tells us, to look for the way things will turn out spiralling from a center, to attend to the shape things will take to come forth in, the forms things want to come as, how a thing will unfold. And finally, even more than looking for the shape of the Spirit's future, our obedience consists in being available to any shape that may be summoning itself through us, from a self that comprehends all of us, God's self.

Being available to any shape that may be summoning itself from the well of God's possibility through us—that, I propose, is what an ecclesiology for the 21st century must never lose sight of. Whether it is an institution or a community, conventicle or societal construct, ethnic enclave or trans-cultural communion, in our day the church is called to be not so much an intentional strategizing agent or a repository of truths to be applied, as it is a well of the possibility that can image the hopes of God for the world and the hopes of the peoples of the world for God. What emerges from the well of possibility is that which governs our strategies and also that which reveals the meaning of our truths.

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[1] A. R. Ammons, "Poetics," in *The Selected Poems: Expanded Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 61.

The stated theme of these lectures asks after the relationship between the ELCA and salvation. Everything I have to say about this relationship is summarized in one simple statement: It becomes appropriate to talk about the church as a community of salvation only under those conditions in which the church is a community of availability to God's possibilities for the future of the creation. If the church is not this community, then talk about God's salvation borders on blasphemy. To the extent that the church is this community, its role in salvation requires no argumentation.

"Well of possibility" as a helpful metaphor

This metaphor speaks poignantly to me, because it throws light both on the present condition of the ELCA and also on its future mandates. With respect to the present, the metaphor helps me understand why, deep within my self-awareness, there lurks a sense of uncertainty just how to describe the present situation of our church. Let me give some examples of this uncertainty. I enjoy sharing the import of our faith for living in today's difficult world with pastors and laity across the church. I am heartened by the earnestness, the intelligence, the obedience, and the sensitivity of these people. But just as surely as I begin to take heart that in these experiences I have encountered what truly is our church, I encounter pastors and laity who are so disappointed in the church that they have turned very nearly cynical; some say that only a thundering prophet in the mold of Amos could speak faithfully to our church in these times.

I have subscribed to the maxim that the true church is to be found in its parishes, where faith takes form in daily life and regular preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments. But I also meet faithful Christians who have never found in any local ELCA congregation the community of love and challenge that can nourish their faith. I have spoken with more than a few pastors who despair that their congregations will ever truly be the church they envision. And there are a number of dedicated pastors who have left the ELCA on the grounds that it is neither the church or even a true church.

When I reflect upon these and many other such diverse experiences, I conclude that only with a great deal of humility and tentativeness can I or anyone else point to any expression of our church and call it the single normative form. My contradictory impressions convince me that I am in touch with the church as a community of possibilities, of coming-to-be, not a community that has already come to be. My experience of the ELCA is not of a community that has taken shape, but rather a community that is in process of taking shape, according to what is being summoned into shape through us from the self of God, Creator Mother and caring Father, redeeming Son Jesus Christ, and dynamic, nurturing Holy Spirit. And this is as it should be. It is only as a community of possibility—a community that is available to God's possibilities, a community that can image itself as a well of that which is coming-to-be—it is only as such a community that the church can, credibly and with actual effect, associate itself in any way with the salvation that God works in our world.

As I view the present and the future of the ELCA, I am impressed by the change we are undergoing. I am impressed both with the frequency with which old things to which we have become accustomed are changing dramatically or passing out of existence, and also with the novelty that is knocking on our doors for entrance into every facet of the church's life. I interpret

this aspect of our church's journey into the future as the well of possibility from which God is summoning new shapes to come forth. On the one hand, there naturally are those who grieve the loss of the old and familiar, and experience anxiety in the face of the unknown new—many of us can identify with both this grief and anxiety. On the other hand, there are those who rejoice at the passing of the old, because it did not belong to them; it did not nourish their faith; they are so encouraged by the prospect of the new that their anxiety recedes to manageable levels. For both, I can think of no better image of the church's existence than the well of God's possibility, from which God's future for us will come. When the poet speaks of the well of possibility (see p. 245), he does so in terms that suggest richness and fertility, but also in the nuances of impenetrability and fearfulness. Possibility carries all those nuances, because it is not automatic or painless or even always beautiful, and it is never predictable, either as to when it will happen or how or with what outcome.

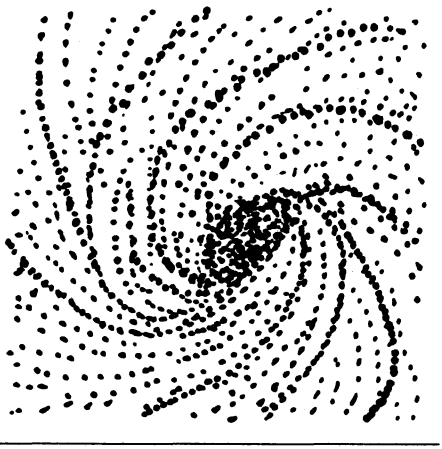
The necessity for theological grounding

When we begin to think about the church, whether as ELCA or the larger church of Jesus Christ, we soon discover that what we think about the church—our "ecclesiology," in technical theological terms—is tightly interwoven with the rest of our faith, with our entire belief system. In these lectures, I do not focus on church strategy, church policy, or church structure, but rather on a basic understanding of the church in our present times.

Transformation: the theological basis for possibility. The metaphor of the church as the well of God's possibility—the community in which God's possibilities come to be—must be grounded and elaborated theologically. The most fundamental grounding lies in the traditional theological concept of *transformation*, elaborated in the concepts of conversion, metanoia, metamorphosis, and theosis.

The theological context for transformation: creation and Creator God. Transformation is the central image of God's work for us as individual Christians and for the church. Transformation is God's process of bringing forth the possibilities that are ours by virtue of God's will and grace. Transformation cannot stand alone, however. It must be viewed in its dynamic interconnection with the total picture of reality that coheres in our faith. This means initially that transformation is the work of the Triune God, carried out in the widest possible cosmic scope—God's work, in other words, in the entire world, in ourselves as humans, and in all that exists as God's creation. God alone is the source and generator of all that is. Our very existence, as well as that of the entire cosmos and planet earth, is grounded finally in nothing else but the intention, the freedom, and the grace of the Creator God. We and our world owe our existence to God's will that we exist, and the kind of world that we live in must also be the world that God intended. We affirm this God-intoxicated view of the world in the Creeds, when we confess that God is the "maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." The church has traditionally spoken of this affirmation in the technical term, "creation-out-of-nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*), thereby asserting that God and no other being or power or source has brought forth the natural world. The word creation means just this: *Nature as the work of God, out of nothing else.*

Our world, therefore, and we ourselves



in it, are constituted by God's action of bringing us to the future that God intends for us. All of cosmic history, human history, and our own personal lives are defined by this vast work of God perfecting the creation that God initiated in the first place. We are what God has created, and our future is the future God holds for us. The church must be placed in this context, and whatever happens in and to the church, whatever the mission of the church is, it must also be placed within this context of God's creation and God's will for the creation's future. When we relate the church to Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, the *Logos* of God, the second person of the Trinity, we are at the same time affirming that whatever the church is about, whatever its mission, it has to do with the eternal will of God for the creation.

The revelation in Jesus Christ speaks to us centrally and concretely of the shape of God's transforming work. Jesus lived a life of availability to God's possibilities; his earthly life portrays for us the substance of such availability. The crucifixion underscores the sense in which God's possibilities seem to be impossibilities when judged by human criteria. In the resurrection we receive the word that God's possibilities can indeed become real in the very world of flesh that God created and in which we live out our earthly existences.

God the Holy Spirit accompanies the creation at every moment and in every situation, and it is this Holy Spirit that makes the resurrection life actual in every moment of our lives. Transformation in the here and now is, strictly speaking, the work of the Holy Spirit.

This grand view of the world in God's hands, as creation under the power of the resurrection, is an essential presupposition of ecclesiology and of our concept of transformation. This view is also the foundation for our trust, our faith in the process of transformation and the church itself as a participant in this process. There is no basis for trusting our own lives and the processes of our transformation and of the church unless we also can believe that somehow all of this is rooted in God, and in the freedom, intentionality, and love of God that we find in Jesus Christ.

Such a theological grounding is not simply an affirmation of what is, with no critical edge. Quite to the contrary, the affirmation of God's triune work as I have just set it forth is both indicative and imperative, both vision for our lives and critique of our lives in the church. The life we live and the church's life are not only resourced, but also governed by the grace of God's creation work. The church not only *is* a signal community within God's work of fulfillment, it also *must become* that community, and it is held accountable by God to hold itself to that vision. The church is not only already vivified by the power of the resurrection, it also must realize more fully what resurrection under the conditions of flesh really entails. The grand view that Christians hold of reality not only gives us confidence in the church and its place in God's salvation work, it also provides a

basis for criticizing and norming the church's life. It is God's creation work and will that give rise to possibilities, and it is that same work and will that governs possibilities and gives them life.

No one has given more sensitive expression to the Christian hope of transformation as it is grounded in confidence in the Creator God and the Spirit's work in creation than the 19th century Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his sonnet, "God's Grandeur"[2]:

The world is charged with the grandeur
of God.
It will flame out, like shining from
shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze
of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck
his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared,
smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares
man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep
down things;
And though the last lights off the black West
went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink
eastward springs—
because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with
ah! bright wings.

To say that the church is well of God's possibilities is to say that the church is defined and constituted by its location within God's work of transformation and that God always broods over the church with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. These lectures are divided into three parts: (1) a theological reflection on the process of transformation and how this understanding of transformation might be relevant to the life of the ELCA; (2) the community of possibility as a community of belonging without conditions; (3) the phenomenon of the people's church, which I term "The Demographics of Possibility." The first part focuses on the history of the ELCA which has made us what we are today. Parts two and three concentrate on future possibilities that I see at the heart of the transformations we are undergoing today.

Transformation: hallmark of Christian tradition

Transformation and the encounter with Jesus. Transformation is as fundamental to the Christian view of things as any belief in our tradition. Transformation is at the heart of our conviction that something fundamentally new can be brought about by God's gracious will and work. We would not be here today as Christians if we did not have the witness and the tradition of actual transformation already wrought in the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. In their relationships with the man Jesus, the apostolic men and women and children found a transformation that changed the very foundations of their lives. It convinced them that doors were open that they had either never dreamed of before or that they considered to be irrevocably closed. They came to envision futures that were no option for them before they encountered the man from Nazareth.

Residing as it does right at the heart of our experience of Jesus and of the apostolic witness to him, this actuality of transformation grounds our Christian affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Logos

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[2] W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, eds., *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (4th ed.; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 66.

of God, who finally stands in our faithful interpretation as the Second Person of the Trinity. These declarations of who Jesus is and of his significance are expressions of faith that the transformation experienced in him is grounded in ultimacy, that its source is a self not our own, God's power of transformation.

Transformation in the New Testament. Transformation is not an add-on to the Christian way of interpreting life and the world. Without transformation Christian faith would not be what it is. Hence it is at the heart of salvation, redemption and sanctification. The New Testament speaks of these realities as Creation and New Creation, the First Adam and the Second Adam, birth and rebirth, the Old Man [sic] and the New Man [sic], this age and the new age, a New Heaven and a New Earth. In each case, the most precious gift of God, central to our faith, is spoken of as the transformation of what is into what shall be, through the grace and power of God—God as Creator, God as Redeemer in Christ, and God the Giver of Life as the Holy Spirit.

A closer analysis of the New Testament would reveal that each of its writings aims at the transformation of the reader. Paul envisions the transformation of the believer from a position of bondage to the Law to the freedom of justification. Mark's Gospel hopes for transformation from self-centeredness and fear to the empowerment that God's reign brings, whereas Matthew focuses upon transformation from the hypocrisy that is grounded in a false interpretation of Israel's Law to the integrity that flows from repentance and a truer obedience as set forth by Jesus. Luke speaks of the transformation from oppression to compassion and mercy; John is governed by a desire for the transformation of the blindness that fails to see God's presence in life to the light that is able to discern eternity under the conditions of history, in Jesus Christ. Even this cursory summary of a few of its writings suggests that the New Testament is thoroughly grounded in, perhaps we could say driven by, the dynamic of transformation. Further, we could understand the message of Christ in the New Testament by careful attention to how each of its writings interprets Jesus Christ in terms of how he brings about this transformation.[3]

Transformation and theosis. The monumental contribution of Eastern Christianity by the fourth century C.E. is its clear sense that human life cannot be adequately understood if transformation is not placed at its core. The great Cappadocians—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Macrina—taught us that the single most important thing about human beings is that they have been created in the image of God.[4] In the Cappadocian perspective, this image is characterized by reason, freedom, and immortality. Immortality describes the entire career of human being, from its conception in the mind of God before the Fall through its earthly existence and thereafter. The totality of the human experiment, as it is comprehended by God's will, is defined by the process of retrieving and fulfilling the immortality in which we were conceived by God from the beginning.

This grand doctrine of metamorphosis does not depict a transformation away from the earthiness of our creaturely existence

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[3] See David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[4] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chaps. 8, 18.

into some other-worldly immortality. Under the images of the first Adam and Christ as the Second Adam and also of the two creations, Adam and Christ, Gregory of Nyssa can write, "The first time, the *Logos* made the flesh; this time the *Logos* was made flesh, so that he might change our flesh to spirit, by being made partaker with us in flesh and blood."[5] Gregory of Nazianzus writes provocatively of this transformation:

> I had a share in the image, but I did not keep it. Christ shares in my flesh that he may both save the image and make the flesh immortal. He communicates a second fellowship with God far more marvelous than the first had been. For then he imparted the better nature to humanity, whereas this time he himself participated in the worse nature of humanity. This is more Godlike than the former action, this is more sublime in the eyes of all who understand.[6]

The Eastern traditions bring all this to expression in their image of *theosis*. For too long, we Westerners have translated this term as deification or divinization and rejected it as an egregious and repulsive elevation of humanity. We know better now, and we recognize that it rightly underscores that human being is not fully what God intends it to be unless and until it is transformed, in the flesh, in its Adamic quality, as God has always intended it, to share fully in God's intended fulfillment of the creation—and this journey of transformation in theosis is one that began at our creation.

Transformation and Lutheran tradition. In our Lutheran understanding of the gospel, transformation is closely related to both justification and sanctification. It is justification by God's grace through faith that enables us to lay claim to the newness that God has chosen us for, and it is sanctification that refers to the enablement by grace that allows us to bring that newness to concrete expression in our everyday life, even if its forms are fallible. What we call conversion or metanoia is nothing else but transformation. Our Lutheran preoccupation with grace clarifies that this transformation is grounded in God's intention and in God's power for us and within us; it is not a humanly devised project.

What does transformation mean today?

What particular nuances does transformation carry that are essential for our understanding today? I call attention to two: newness and change. *Newness* means that what we look for from God and what forms the content of our hope is something new, something not yet fully known or possessed. Despite much traditional rhetoric to the contrary, Christian faith is not essentially restorationist in its perspective. The hope that burns in our hearts is not only warming, but also so much a part of us that without it we would be torn apart. The grace we experience is likewise a present reality that actually makes our life possible. Strangely, however, the flame of hope and the presence of real grace live within us as much in anticipation as in present reality, as much tomorrow as today, and as much unfinished in us as they are completely a part of us. Like the ancient Habiru who became the Hebrews—the Israelites who came to Palestine—we are have-nots who are in the process of always receiving what can never be fully possessed, we are never haves who can count their riches. Little wonder that when we speak in technical theological terms, we say that God's creation and God's

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[5] Quoted in Pelikan, 284-5.

[6] Quoted in Pelikan, 285.

promise for that creation are thoroughly eschatological! When we think of God's good gifts and God's good presence, we think of that which is new, not yet fully known nor yet fully possessed.

If we truly believe that our lives are constituted by God's grace, and that this grace is the gift of God's transforming promise, then we recognize that our lives and their promise are woven on the loom of change and process. It is a fundamental mistake to think of our lives and of God's grace as a solid unchanging core that remains untouched as it moves through changing terrain. The Habiru were not constituted by a core of nomadic homelessness that changed incrementally into landownership through the experience of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan. It is true that most of the ancient Hebrews, too much of the time, held to the image of themselves as having arrived. They gave Yahweh thanks for having saved them from poverty and for translating them into the condition of possessing and prospering. The prophets reminded them forcefully that in thinking thusly, they had missed the point of their own history. Their being was defined by a constant receiving—receiving the new that God gives and that cannot be possessed and being transformed in the process, only to find that the transformation is never complete. This is difficult for us to understand, just as it was for the Hebrews. We demand closure, whereas God grants only new visions of open-endedness. We long for a steady-state creation in which our place is clear, certain, and comfortable, but God gives us an evolutionary creation in which clarity is always transforming itself into ambiguity, certainty into vulnerability and riskiness, comfort into challenge. And just as there was never an Eden in which our existence was different from this, so we know of no future Heaven in which transformation will no longer define us.

Transformation is in itself a summary of what Christians believe, the epitome of our faith. It is a transformation that we believe characterizes our actual present existence and that of the world we live in, as well as the future hope to which we hold, our personal hope beyond our own physical death, and also our hope for the future of the cosmos, the entire creation.

The character of God as good and loving is essential for our understanding of transformation, just as it is for interpreting all of God's works. What we say about God's work in creation, judgment, the governance of history, fulfillment—all of these are dependent for their meaning on our conception of the character of the God who is doing the creating, judging, governing, and fulfilling. Our tradition tells us that God is fundamentally good and loving. Even those traditions that give prominence to God's judgment, to Law, as well as Gospel, give the priority to love and goodness. The work of God is a working out of God's character, from creation to eschatological fulfillment. This understanding is given dogmatic status in our concepts of the economic and immanent Trinity, where we say that what God does in history is utterly consonant with who God is in God's own inner being. And even though we cannot step inside God's mind, we rest our faith on the conviction that that mind is revealed in the love of Jesus Christ. Theologically and dogmatically there are no other options for us as Christians: Whatever we believe God to be willing and doing, finally crystallizes into goodness and love.

The weight of our belief in transformation rests also on this understanding of God's character, because that character defines the motivation for our being transformed, and also both its methodology and its goal.

Transformation as ecclesiological focus. Why this emphasis upon transformation? Because we cannot adequately speak about the church and its place in salvation unless we understand also the centrality of God's will and work of transformation. When early Christians called themselves People of the Way, when the church understood itself as a *communio viatorum*, a community of pilgrims, they were giving expression to this central insight—that the church is constituted by the work of God in Christ as transformation. When we speak of ourselves as the church catholic, we remind ourselves that we stand in this broad tradition. When we speak of ourselves as a community grounded in the Protestant Principle, *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the church must always be reformed), we acknowledge that it is a tradition of always receiving what cannot be possessed, never a tradition of having once-and-for-all arrived in the Promised Land. As Joseph Sittler once observed, there is a sense in which the quintessence of being Christian is actualized more in the person of Moses peering into the distance from Mount Nebo than in the crowds who were getting their feet wet as they walked through the Jordan River into Canaan.[7]

The experience of transformation. Before we go further, let us attend briefly to the experiential implications of transformation—both for individuals and for communities. The experience is both familiar to us and also contrary to our intuitions and our intentions. We are familiar with the sense that our children and our parents age, just as we are aware of the conditions of life changing around us and in our own lifestyles. We do not so often perceive that this change is actually the process of becoming something new and different, a transformation. Again, we may observe that our children or other young persons with whom we have worked have actually become fuller, more mature, exciting people. We recognize the bases—psychological, intellectual and physical—on which the new and fuller person has built, so we know that this is the transformation of a person and not the substitution of different person. On the other hand, we are strangely unconscious of the biological changes that we undergo ourselves, strikingly, in our own human development from conception to adulthood. If we are serious about change, we tend to view ourselves as having an essential center, or a kernel of unchanging selfhood, which is augmented, degenerates, or changes to meet goals. So, we move from computer illiterate selves to the state of literacy, through the process of learning. Or, we cultivate the seven habits of highly successful persons, and we move from inept, insecure persons to aggressive and self-confident men and women. Regularly, in seminary education and pastoral ministry, we urge students and pastors to seek counseling or other guidance to work on their problems, problems such as lack of self-

> Transformation is in itself a summary of what Christians believe, the epitome of our faith.

[7] Joseph Sittler, "The View from Mount Nebo," in *The Care of the Earth and Other University Sermons* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 75-87.

confidence, addictions of various sorts, inability to handle conflict, and the like.

In all of these considerations, we seldom work with a concept of transformation, that is, with a sense that we are ourselves undergoing the process of becoming in which our identifiable self becomes genuinely regenerated into what can only be called newness, a new self. Nor do we think of our communities in the framework of transformation. What is at stake here is a persistent worldview of machines and mechanisms, rather than a worldview of dynamic change and becoming. When we take our car into the shop, we do not expect a defective engine or a defective electrical system to be transformed into something new, but rather we expect defective parts and interactions to be replaced or repaired.

> The church cannot be church apart from its being a community where God's possibilities and hopes are engaged...

Too often, we look upon persons and communities in the same way. We do not expect a first-year seminarian who has been approved by her or his professional leadership committee to become a genuinely new and transformed person in the process of four years of intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and practical experience. Most often, we expect the person who has entered this process to remain pretty much the same, with defects removed and with actual and potential strengths enhanced, much as lifting weights daily for six months will remove unwanted bulges and develop desirable ones. With liposuction or other body-enhancing surgery, we want our selves to remain the same, only more desirable.

We may view congregational communities in the same perspective. When a congregation that seeks a new pastor undertakes its required self-study, it may view that study as a survey of the machinery, with the goal in mind that a major part, namely, the pastor, needs to be replaced. The self-study becomes, then, a descriptive order to the parts department for a replacement that will work well in the overall machinery. I am suggesting that a more adequate image would be that the self-study describes as well as it can the trajectory of transformation on which the congregation finds itself, and it seeks a leader, on his or her own pathway of transformation, to be a companion on the pathway. The person and office of the bishop should also be defined in terms of communities and persons who live within the continual dynamics of transformation in the Spirit of God.

The worldview of transformation is not so much the perspective of an essential self being repaired and rendered more desirable as it is a sense of a self in the process of becoming—not a defined self being altered so much as a self whose definition is in the entire process. Intentionality, planning, and control are part of the process, but the sense of undergoing a process that is not in our control, of being shaped as much as we do the shaping, is even more prominent. We are in the process of becoming something whose outcome and aim we cannot fully or even very adequately comprehend. We are not the potters of highly successful persons as much as we are ourselves on the wheel of the potter, whom we call God in Christ.

Transformation: God's hopes for the world, the world's hopes for God. The awareness of possibilities and the transformation that prepares for the realization of possibilities constitute a concrete point of contact between God and the world. This is a point where God's hope for the world becomes actual and accessible for the entire creation, including human persons. Conversely it is also a point where the hopes of the world for God likewise become actual and accessible—even when those hopes are articulated in terms that do not use the name of God. An ecclesiology of possibility recognizes this point of contact between God and the world and also understands that it is of the very essence of the church that it be a community in which there is a forceful expression of God's hopes and the world's hopes.

There is no single insight concerning the church that is more significant than this one: that in its preaching, teaching, worship, pastoral care, personal interactions, and public ministry, it is a community in which these hopes are a prime reality, and it is called to become a community in which their primacy becomes ever more clear. If the church is not such a community, then its existence is trivial, it is just another institution, and it has lost its sense of why God created it in the first place. The church cannot be church apart from its being a community where God's possibilities and hopes are engaged and where the transformative work of God is welcomed and nurtured. If we wish to relate the church to salvation, we will focus on the church as this community of possibility and transformation, where God's hopes and the world's hopes interface. Only in communities such as these does talk of salvation make sense.

At the outset, I spoke of the grief and anxiety that accompany change in the church, counterpoised with joy and encouragement. Grief, anxiety, joy and expectation are significant experiential signals of the process of transformation, both among individuals and communities. All of these four characteristics of experience may be authentic and also inauthentic. Grief at the loss of that which has nourished our faith and the cause of God in the world is authentic in Christian terms, while grief attached to the loss of that which nourished our idolatries and which caused pain and starved the faith of others is inauthentic grief. Precisely the converse analysis may be made of that which brings joy and encouragement. The depth and richness of God's transforming work will always call into question our grief, anxiety, joy and encouragement when they are grounded in falsehood and superficiality, just as it will provide strength and energy for that which is grounded in the work of God's spirit.

Why devote so much time to discussing a worldview centered in transformation? Because, I contend, *unless we can identify with the worldview of transformation we cannot enter into an adequate ecclesiology for our time, nor can we relate that ecclesiology to salvation, because only as we share in God's transforming work can we truly be available to the possibilities that God intends to bring forth through the church.*

Translating the ecclesiology of possibility into a Lutheran idiom

How transformation works: The dialectic of future-past-present. Transformation in itself is an abstraction unless it somehow becomes available as concrete dynamic for our lives and, in particular, for the life of the church whose life we focus upon in these lectures. Martin Heidegger, who began his career as a German Catholic seminarian,

went on to become arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, even though his life work ended in ambiguity because of his controversial stance toward Hitler. In the course of his life, he reflected upon what it means for human life to become what it is destined to be. No one in our recent history has produced more profound and fruitful interpretations of the human process of becoming, of being transformed into full humanity. As many other theologians before me, I find his interpretations useful. They may help us construct a framework for translating transformation into concrete, accessible terms for our life together in the ELCA.

The dialectic of transformation. Heidegger's dialectic of existence recognizes that the determinative dimension of human life is its becoming what it is destined to become as a fulfilled life. This means that responding to the future is the first and defining characteristic of human existence. But just what is it that possesses a future? What is it that is called for to become what it can be? The answer is: our present identity becomes what its future possibilities impel; and our identity is constituted by our past; our present identity is what we have become up to this very moment. The present is not so much a time as it is a situation in which we are called to act in such a way that our real past can be true to its real future. The dialectic of human existence is therefore a rhythm of *future-past-present.* I propose that this dialectic of existence is in fact describing a process of our transformation, and I further understand the dialectic as a powerful description of the dynamic well of possibility that governs my thinking in these lectures. We are in fact describing how new shapes may indeed spiral from the persons and the communities that form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The first beat in this rhythm is the challenge of our future, the future in which we can become what God has graciously created us to become and has called us to become. This is not a fantastical future, not an "anything goes and anything is possible" future, but rather the open future of the very concrete and unrepeatable identity that we have assumed in the course of our history up to this moment.

The second moment in the rhythm of future-past-present is sounded by the past, the reservoir of our actual identity. Once again, not some romanticized, fantastical image of the past, but our actual past as it has worked itself out to the present time.

The third beat is the present, the situation in which our past actually responds to its future. The past is rich and perhaps glorious, full of memories and the juices of life that insist on authentic expression. The future may taste unbearably good, possibilities may be of world-historical significance. Nevertheless, the dreams of the past and the lure of the future must pass through the narrow gate of our present situation. The present must be perceived for what it is, however. It is not the end-all and be-all that must be accommodated in and of itself, but rather it is our passage to the future. As passage, it cannot be disregarded, it must be understood very accurately, and it will stamp its character on our future. Just as our church's twentieth-century identity reveals clearly that we passed through the sixteenth century that was German and Scandinavian, so our twenty-first century identity will reveal that we passed through the late twentieth century that was North American. Our destiny as a church, however, is not to canonize the late twentieth century, but to honor what, under God's will and grace, the late twentieth century can become.

The future issues the call, and the past sets the trajectory. The trajectory that flows

from the past is not simply a extrapolation from that past, however. Since an extrapolation is only a magnification of what has become actual in the past, it cannot take the measure of genuinely new actualities that can emerge from our possibilities. The trajectory of the future is defined by what God can make out of our past. One could not have extrapolated David's Israel, nor the Israel of Isaiah's Suffering Servant, from the Habiru bands of the second millennium before the Common Era, but Yahweh could bring the latter out of the possibilities of the former, and did so, but in a difficult passage that is best interpreted with the metaphor of clay being shaped and ground on the potter's wheel. We believe that the early Christian church also belongs to the possibilities that God brought forth from those earlier times, though no futurologist who worked in King David's time could have extrapolated early Christianity from its ancient predecessors. Such musings prompt us to ask, What is it that God will bring forth from the ELCA that will be as strikingly transformed from its earlier manifestations as was the Israel of David and Isaiah that God transformed from the Habiru and the other peoples who identified with the Habiru's stories?

The demands of the dialectic. The dialectic of transformation places several definite demands upon us. First, there must be unflinching honesty about our past, so that we may grasp the authentic identity that that past bears. Paraphrasing Pogo's dictum, "We have looked into the past, and that past is us." This insight must govern our exploration of our past identity. It must, perhaps, employ the hermeneutic of suspicion, so as to avoid hypocrisy and what Sartre called "bad faith." Nevertheless, our effort to retrieve the past must not be either blaming others or hating ourselves, because those are also an act of bad faith toward the possibilities that God has given our past. Critical honesty recognizes that though the past is a trail of tears and broken dreams, it is also a vessel of God-given identity and possibility. Critical honesty together with faith recognizes that all facets of the past must be retrieved together, and, above all, that our retrieval of the past is governed by the challenge to act in obedience to the future that God can bring forth out of that past.

Honesty about the possible future is also demanded by this dialectic of transformation. God is not bound by the limitations of our vision into the future, but God does submit to the constraints that our actions place upon the future. The key here is that we recognize that our future is not an abstract, fantastical future, but a future of which our past is capable. Honest realism is yoked with creative imagination in probing our future. It is not the most mundane and banal future that God has in store for us—it may have been the mistake of the steward who buried his master's talent in the ground to think that God is looking for the maximum return that is also maximally safe. The God of the Big Bang, the God who brought the DNA molecule into being in the primordial slime on planet earth from the materials provided by the Big Bang, and who brought us forth from that same medium, does not have the track record of a cautious investor! We must have that same spirit about us when we contemplate what might be the possibilities of our ELCA past for our ELCA future.

Finally, the dialectic of transformation requires that we be sensitive to the contours of the present and their import for the passage of past into future. Our past was not created solely for this present, but it has been poured into it, and we must discern what that past then means for both our

present and our future. The past and future are subjects for our understanding and interpretation, whereas the present is a context also for our action as well as for our efforts at understanding and interpreting.

Plurality and the dialectic of transformation

Perhaps more than any other factor today, the element of plurality must be kept in our minds as we approach transformation and the dialectic of its dynamic. Since plurality plays a significant role in our church's participation in God's transforming work, it poses a challenge for Lutherans who are not naturally accustomed to pluralism. This is the first of several examples I will provide where the challenges facing our church encounter us Lutherans at what may be called our weaker points, rather than at our strengths. Here, and in each of the following parts, I underscore that we must be clearly aware of our weaknesses and how they come into play, so that we can bring our best resources to bear on the challenges that face us.

The impact of plurality becomes obvious in all three aspects of the dialectic of transformation—past, present, and future. When we speak of the past as the bearer of our identity in the ELCA, we recognize that there is no single, undifferentiated past to which we can refer, and therefore no single identity that we bring into the present. Immediately, this poses a difficulty for us as Lutherans, because we are, of all Christian communities, one of those that is most concerned, perhaps even obsessed, to maintain oneness. Many examples come to mind. We speak of one Word of God, one ministry of the Word and Sacraments, just as we publicly presume that there is one Lutheran theology and one basic education for pastors. Although it allows for flexibility, we authorize one basic worship book, and, until very recently, one hymnal. We have one authorized constitution for congregations, one for synods, and we attempt to enforce one pattern of ownership and governance for our seminaries.

Plurality of past identities. There is much talk about diversity and multiculturality in the ELCA today, but it is a curious kind of talk. It is not too much to say that oneness is an ideology in our church's public life, no matter what we say about multiculturality, because our fundamental intention seems to be to make our diversities into one homogeneity, instead of acknowledging them and celebrating them for what they are.

If we are to comprehend our real past as it is being transformed by God into new possibilities, we will have to understand our past in new ways, we will have to re-create our history, so that it more adequately represents our actual past and thus also our actual identity that is borne by that past. This approach to diversity as the raw material for our unifying is not a new one for us. Even though the northern European Lutherans who came to North America were not all alike, differing in ethnic background, social and economic class placement, in language, and in traditions of worship and piety, we have tended to consider that diversity either as tangential to our Lutheran identity or as a problem that would and should be integrated into a Lutheran oneness. The *Common Service Book* of 1918, for example, amalgamated the diversity of German Reformation worship into one liturgy that was enjoined upon the churches; the *Service Book and Hymnal* of 1958 was both more contemporary and more catholic, but also driven by the vision of one form of liturgical worship for all North American Lutherans. Theologically, even though both twentieth century German and Scandina-

vian theologies were taught in our seminaries, as well as the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, it was seldom said that these were alternative forms of Lutheran theology. Rather it was assumed and taught that they were all one Lutheran theology, an assumption that glossed over the real differences and put pressure on teachers and students alike to harmonize them when such an effort was hardly possible.

If it be true that even our European backgrounds carry no single Lutheran identity, it is even more the case that the amalgam of Lutheran groups and individuals absorbed even more diversity from their experience in North America. The ideology of oneness asserted that Lutherans could not be pacifist, nor could they affirm the social gospel, nor could they Americanize Lutheranism. Yet, the Hartwick and Franckean Synods contained a strong pacifist tradition, while traditions of ethics espoused in such diverse places as Augustana and Gettysburg seminaries and Hamma Divinity School were clearly akin to the social gospel. One of the richest and largest traditions of Lutheranism in North America, in central Pennsylvania, which numbered at its high point more than 800,000 Lutherans, was clearly committed to Americanization. However, even today our public stance looks upon such diversity as aberration from a single Lutheran tradition rather than as evidence of a diversity of past traditions that bears our identities into the present situation.

There is more diversity in North America than the heritages of northern Europeans, however. There are Lutherans among us who are not northern European by background. African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and native American peoples come immediately into our purview. There are also those who come into our church as Caucasian Americans, but from heritages different from the mainstream, decidedly not northern European and Lutheran. Their identities as Lutherans are borne by pasts that differ markedly from the oneness that we publicly acknowledge. As such, the dialectic of God's transformation takes shape differently, according to the specific identity of the various communities within our church.

> Our future is not an abstract, fantastical future, but a future of which our past is capable.

Plurality in worship. As an example of plural identities, consider our forms of worship. There are powerful differences between the transformation of my worship heritage from the *CSB* and *SBH* and that of an African American Lutheran whose heritage very likely is only tangentially tied up with those two books of worship, but rather embraces the worship traditions of the traditional American Black Churches.

When we speak of Lutheran identity as borne by our actual pasts up to the present moment, is the African American Lutheran called to nullify the Black traditions as bearers of his or her Lutheran identity? Or am I to accommodate my worship heritage to the Black traditions? And if it is true that God's future for us as the church is the future of our actual past, must we not acknowledge that just as there is no single Lutheran past for us, so, too, there may not be a single Lutheran future?

Plurality in reading the Bible. Worship is one of the ways in which the diversities of our past identities makes itself felt most strongly. Another significant indicator of diversity is present in our ways of reading the Bible, where the transformation of our identity into future possibility is most vitally manifest. As Christians, we have not only the instinct to interpret our identity in biblical idiom, we have the deep need to do so. There is a sense that if we cannot find our identity in the Scripture, we would incur a deep loss. If our past identity is thus interpreted, our possibilities for the future will also be imaged in Scripture. This accounts for the sharpness in our exchanges over scriptural reading and interpretation. Several proposals for reading the Bible have arisen in our recent history: (1) a confessional insistence that it be read through the lens of justification, the famous "canon within the canon"; (2) the African American reminder that justification cannot take our eyes off the exhortation from the Epistle of James that faith without works is dead; (3) women's appeal that the language in which we read the Bible and the categories of our interpretation cannot canonize the historic subordination and even repression of women and their experience; (4) the popular liberationists' call for interpreting Scripture, even without elaborate scholarly analysis, so it can speak the message of Jesus' compassion and empowerment to the poor and the marginalized; (5) the homileticians' widely affirmed narrative or "story" approach to Scripture that reads biblical texts in ways that embrace the personal stories of the readers; (6) the opinion that we must read the Scripture in community with our ecumenical partners, particularly the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.

These are just some of the earnest proposals in our ELCA today, sometimes formal, at other times informal and even unspoken. We do not take the measure of the hopes and fears that attend our journey as a community of God's transformation unless we recognize the significance of these proposals for that journey. There is no way that anyone or any group within our church would allow the Bible to be interpreted in ways that stifle the past identities that they believe are God-given or in ways that are less than empowering of the possibilities that they believe God is bringing forth from that past. The same is true of worship: No individual or group in our church who takes worship and the sacraments seriously can be at peace if they do not find their own identities and future possibilities included within the basic ritual of the church.

Can we handle this fundamental diversity in the ELCA? Our concern for oneness comes to us very authentically. After all, our rightly famous Article VII of the Augsburg Confession asserts that for the unity of the church, it is enough that there be agreement on the pure preaching and teaching of the gospel and on the administration of the sacraments in accord with the gospel. The thrust of our Confessions is that pure preaching and teaching amounts to faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. Even though this oneness is authentic and fundamental to Lutheranism, it nevertheless poses problems for us today. If this oneness means to assert that there is only one form of worship and preaching and only one overall theology, then it poses grave difficulties for us when we attempt to take the measure of the diversity of identities that exist among us. If, on the other hand, this oneness understands itself to be expressed in and through great diversity, then such an understanding requires vigorous elaboration and interpretation in the context of our present diversity. We are far from the goal of such elaboration and interpretation. Our struggles within our

own ELCA family and also with the ecumenical relationships we have cultivated over the past three decades suggest that we have a very low tolerance of diversity in understanding both what the pure teaching and preaching of the gospel is and also what it means to worship in accordance with the gospel. Our struggles lead one to believe that we have an equally low tolerance level of diversity in understanding ordained ministry and what constitutes adequate preparation for ordination.

Let me emphasize that these comments are not intended as yet another insistence on diversity. Rather, I call our attention to the *profound significance of the fact of diversity in our heritages* for the transforming work of God in which we all share, the transforming work that makes us available for God's possibilities for the church on the one hand, and that constitutes our future in God, on the other. This puts a new perspective on our understanding of our diversity. Our diversities do not exist chiefly as elements awaiting some kind of unification or harmonization in a more stable multicultural community. Rather, diversities constitute a symphony of identities whose possibilities God is calling forth in our midst as we undergo the transformations that God's future requires. Rather than viewing our diversities through the lens of unity, we should see them as a synergy, a working together. We should not be focusing as much attention on harmonizing or unifying our diversities as on listening to them, so that we can better understand our identities today as we attempt to respond in the present to God's call into the future that the Creator God has prepared for us.

The diversity of our pasts, with the fact that we bring with us a diversity of identities, translates into a diversity of futures, a diversity of presents, and therefore also a diversity of present obediences, since it is through our obedience in the present that the future is birthed. When we attempt to discern the future to which God is calling us as church, as the ELCA, and when we seek to fashion the strategies for present action that will birth that future, we must, if what I have suggested is true, recognize that all of our discernment and all of our strategizing must be in the plural. This fact, as I have suggested, hits us not at our strongest points but at our weakest. I say this, because diversity requires of us that we integrate within our self-consciousness as the ELCA and count as intrinsic to our being church, the actuality of a pluralism of Lutheran identities, and as a consequence of that pluralism, a pluralism also of futures and of present obedience. God's well of possibility is constituted by a diversity of possibilities, not a single set of options.

We should not be focusing as much attention on harmonizing or unifying our diversities as on listening to them...

It is not enough to say that the diversity among us is an ethnic diversity or a gender diversity, or a social class diversity, or a cultural diversity. Our diversity is intrinsic to our being Lutheran and to our being the Lutheran church. Lutheran is not a description of our essence, to which our diversities relate as accidents, in the Aristotelian scheme. A common Lutheranism is not

what is important about us as church people, particularly if it rests upon the assumption that our diversities are secondary. Rather, our diversities constitute the form in which whatever is essential about us becomes actual in us, and whatever it means to be Lutheran is accessible to us only under the forms of our diversities.

If we are serious about an ecclesiology of God's possibilities, then we must be utterly serious about the significance of diversities among us. If we are serious about the church as sharing in the call of God's future, then we must also be utterly respectful of the diversities of that future to which this church is called. And this seriousness and respectfulness of diversity must be intrinsic to what we believe our church is and to how that church does its work. If we believe that our church is caught up in God's work of transformation, that it is constituted by that process, then we must be equally clear that transformation is not one thing, but rather a galaxy of transformations.

Finally, if we are serious about all of this, we must reckon with the fact that we do not exhibit an abundance of grace and agility in appropriating such diversity at the very core of our Lutheran identity. We might say that our immediate ELCA past does not indicate that the diversity of futures will come easily to us. We must undertake deep soul-searching in order to discern the possibilities of diversity within our communal existence as the ELCA. If we believe that God is truly calling the ELCA to the richness of futures in God's kingdom that are present in our church today, it will take a great deal of our imagination and creativity and a large quantity of God's grace for us to recognize how we can we undergo the transformations that our present diversity presses toward.

Critical questions that transformation places before the ELCA

The framework that I have proposed for considering the process of God's transforming work in our midst as the ELCA opens up some significant questions that we will want to deal with as we consider our response to God's call that we obey our churchly identity as a community of God's possibilities.

What holds the ELCA together? When we reflect upon just what our actual past histories as the ELCA carry as our identity, some obvious critical questions arise. The first is: Just what is it, coming from our past, that has held the ELCA together as an entity then, and what holds it together today? The answers to these questions are not separable from our Christian or Lutheran existence as individuals or as local congregations or as regional communities, but I am concerned with them, as they condition our existence as the ELCA and thus give us a clue as to what makes up the ELCA identity that is challenged to respond to the call of its future.

I suggest that there are two elements that have held us together in the past and that hold us together at the present moment as the ELCA: (1) the actuality, the *thatness* of an institution, and (2) the people who presently sustain this institution, together with their institutional and faith histories. Without these two, together, we would not be the ELCA. If the institution were not in place, there is no reason to believe that anyone would decide to establish an ELCA from scratch, and if there were not people, and people with these particular histories, the institution would disappear.

Institution and people do not exist as abstractions, but as living, breathing con-

cretions. The ethnic histories of the people are concrete: immigrants from northern Europe, immigrants from other parts of the world, and North Americans who were for some reason attracted to what is now the ELCA. Apart from the crazy-quilt institutional creations of the Lutheran immigrants who came to this country, the ELCA would not be what it is. To this, there have come the institutional histories of others—of Roman Catholics who have become ELCA Lutherans, as well as free church Christians, Baptists, and those whose institutional past was the traditional Black church or Latin American Catholicism or Pentecostalism. But the fact is that the ELCA today is not a crazy-quilt collection of institutions, but one institution, and its very *thatness* is fundamental to our existence.

Ironically, it is the institution of the ELCA that is the object of intense criticism today. Much of this criticism gives the impression that we could easily do without the institution, that we would be better off without it. However one feels about that, it is clear that without the institution we would not be the ELCA, and we would not be talking to each other except in our local domains, and those domains would not have the shape they have today. And there would be a quite different community of discourse without the ELCA. If the ELCA were not our community of discourse, with all that it entails, we would not be talking the way we are about what this church's stake is in justification by grace, or what the justification means in today's world, nor would we be arguing about the real presence in the Eucharist, nor would we be anxious about whether we are too much a mainline Protestant denomination. Nor would we be arguing about inclusiveness and the so-called quota system.

These themes arise as issues because we are the ELCA, in a context that is conditioned decisively by our past trajectories, by our specific ecumenical conversation partners, and by the specific societal challenges that we encounter on the particular pathway that is ours. When we forget the significance of the very fact that the ELCA exists as institution, we tend to focus on what is wrong with the institution and on its disobediences. An ecclesiology of God's possibilities, as I am proposing it, grounded in God's work of transformation, compels us to focus just as much on the future possibilities of the institution that God is calling us to.

The faith histories of the people that comprise this institution are also concrete. These faith histories are too diverse to analyze in detail. If we speak only of the original immigrant histories from northern Europe, they do share a focus on faith alone, grace alone, and Christ alone (*sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus*). They also share both a broad stream of pietism and catholic heritage that has been appropriated critically. Our pietism accounts for our biblical emphasis and our concern for prayer, and heartfelt commitment that makes a difference in out daily lives. Our catholic heritage accounts for our adherence to the classical liturgical worship and to classical doctrine, our episcopal form of church government, and our ecumenical outreach. Increasingly, we are discovering a strong representation of histories that call for critique and reform of both our classical pietism and our classical catholicity, histories that, despite their variety, may be called liberationist. Publicly, we do not often affirm both our pietism and our catholicity as wholesome elements of our identity; we too often set the two against each other. Even more often, we set both pietist and catholic identities over against the liberationist. Our pietist and catholic faith are also predominantly quietist, whereas the liberationist

Both our pietism and our catholicity are wholesome elements of our identity.

identities among us find activist and revisionist forms of faith more adequate. One of the most rewarding contributions to our church life is the awareness that there are new and rich traditions of celebration among us, particularly those of the African Americans and Latinos.

If any of these strands of personal faith history were taken away, our ELCA would not be what it is today—they are all part of the multiple identities whose possibilities under God we are called to nurture.

What is the ELCA called to be? This is our second critical question. There are at least three answers being given in our midst today, consciously and unconsciously, and each of these answers carries with it important implications.

There is the often-quoted answer that we are called to be a reforming movement within the church catholic. This view harks back to the intention of Martin Luther and his colleagues, who never intended to establish a separate church organization, but rather aimed at the revitalization of the sixteenth century western church. This view argues that we are called to be evangelical catholics, catholics with a difference.

A second answer, which is more often latent than manifest, responds that we possess an Lutheran inviolable identity from our history. We are the church of the descendants of the northern European immigrants and those others who are attracted to the church of these descendants. This view argues that we have an identity from this immigrant tradition that cannot be forsaken. It is an identity rooted in the Lutheran Confessions and the theology that they have spawned, in the Lutheran version of the classical liturgy, in the great music of the German Lutheran churches, and in the understanding of Word and Sacrament ministry that emerged from that tradition. Limits must be set to changes in this classical identity, this view argues, because we cannot deny who we have been and who we are. We cannot be all things to all people. In this view, the ELCA has the status of an ethnic branch of the catholic church, whose distinctiveness is this inviolable identity.

A third answer is that we are called, in our congregations as well as in our regional and churchwide life, to be the church for the persons and the localities where we exist. We do not minister to our people and our localities as reformers of some larger church, nor do we minister only within a certain ethnic tradition. We are called to minister on the basis of the full gospel and its traditions, and we are accountable to bring the persons who are in our orbit into engagement with the fullness of the life of the church of Jesus Christ, not with just a selected aspect of that church. If the persons who come to our parishes do not encounter the fullest possible expression of Christ's church in us, the church is not actual in their lives.

Although I do not consider these three answers equally adequate, I do believe that each of them could be accepted as a faithful response to our ELCA identity. I also believe that it makes a significant difference for the future of the ELCA which of

these we accept. Finally, I believe that these alternative views of our response to God's calling deserve widespread discussion.

For example, if we do consider ourselves called to be a branch of the wider church, with an essential identity in the faith of the northern European immigrants, inclusiveness of other identities may be considered desirable but not essential. We might not, for example, set a priority on outreach to African Americans and Latinos, but would rather see our priority to become a white church with northern European roots that welcomes all others who are attracted to our community and that enters into ecumenical relationships with the traditional Black churches and the Pentecostal and Roman Catholic churches that are more indigenous to Latino experience. Although it would be politically incorrect to propose this publicly as a direction for the ELCA, we do function in the manner of this option more than we would like to admit.

If we consider ourselves to be a reforming movement within the church catholic, we will always put highest priority on ecumenical relations with the Roman Catholic church and other churches that are associated with it. In some sense, unity with the Roman Catholic church will assume the status of being our purpose, and as such it will in fact count as a betrayal of our purpose as the church of Jesus Christ. Our theology, worship, church organization, ecumenical outreach, and even our attitude toward authority in the church and toward women in the church will be conditioned by reference to the Roman Catholic church. This option is widely held in the ELCA among certain groups of clergy and theologians. Evangelical catholicism is a defensible position among us, and it is one of the chief sources of polemic and controversy today.

The third option would mean a church that compels attention to Christ and to the world, rather than to some local tradition or some other churchly group.

Each of the answers that I have suggested carries its own baggage of implications for our understanding of the ELCA identity that is called by God to be transformed into its future possibilities. Each of these views is richer than my descriptions, and there are surely other views that I have overlooked. These views should be the topic of churchwide discussion. Perhaps we are called to accept all of them.

Church strategy: necessary, but inadequate. One of the salient characteristics of the ELCA and its predecessor denominations has been their concern for analysis and planning. We have been among the most energetic ecclesiastical consumers of social-scientific data and interpretations about ourselves and the social context in which we minister. For four decades at least, these churches have welcomed the best that organizational science and strategic planning techniques can offer, and we have allowed the results of these disciplines to make a difference for our structures and policies. We have been convinced that the Holy Spirit guides the church in and through the best use of our reason and planning capability. Our goals have been evangelical, and our forms have most often employed rational strategies in their service.

I believe that this is a sound and faithful part of our ministry. However, a focus upon the church as a community of God's possibilities under the conditions of transformation provides a perspective on strategizing and planning that is overlooked only at our peril. Planning and strategy activities actually share my emphasis on the dialectic of transformation: they pay attention to our past, they articulate goals for the future, and they analyze the present means for arriving

at those goals.

Planning and strategy, however—whether they are brought to bear by local grassroots communities or by the national ELCA corporate office—are basically activities of extrapolation, that is, projecting the trends that are likely to emerge from the past and present. Extrapolation cannot take the measure of possibilities. Extrapolation is only as good as its data bases, it cannot take into account the extraordinary. It is well known that the evolutionary process, for example, can be explained by looking backwards, but cannot be predicted forwards. Journalists often take delight in reporting how quaint and misguided are the expert predictions undertaken years or decades ago to forecast what our own time would be like. It is irresponsible *not* to carry out the reflection that planning and strategy involve, but it is also irresponsible not to recognize that the church is called as a community of God's possibilities, not God's extrapolations.

If God had settled for what a social scientist could extrapolate from the Habiru groups, Israel and Jesus would never have happened.

If we take seriously that the center of our ELCA concern is possibility and transformation, grounded in God's will and grace, we will assume a very definite set of attitudes and expectations about the future that our planning considers.

—First, we will recognize the receptive dimension of our existence in the church. We are active persons, possessing freedom, and we must make decisions for which we are accountable. But our exercise of freedom takes place in the context of the ambience of God's giving. This includes the gift of our bodies, our social network, and our place in the process of history. No matter how earnestly we do strategy and how vigorously we act, we cannot force events, we must wait for them and receive them. We anticipate our participation in God's transformation by waiting for God's good time, and also for the discerning spirit by which we shall know when and where and how our strategies are to be pursued.

—Second, we will recognize that extrapolation from our past and present is not enough. If God had settled for what a social scientist could extrapolate from the Habiru groups, Israel and Jesus would never have happened. We live always on tip-toe, knowing that the strategizing may well have illuminated our past and present, but well aware that the possibilities that are the key to our future lie unilluminated by even our best analysis.

—Third, we will feel in our bones that our pilgrimage of transformation itself shares in the holiness and power of God. This means that our model for imaging our transformation will not be limited to the community-organized process of social reform or the corporatised process of preparing to meet corporate goals in the milieu of expanding markets and technological change. Neither Saul Alinsky nor Lee Iacocca are our models, even though we can continue to learn from both of them. Our image must be the history of the DNA molecule in the primal soup transformed by God to become the biosphere of the planet

and the human culture of the global village. Our image must be the Habiru of the third millennium B.C.E. transformed by God to become Israel, the church, and the Islamic *umma*.

We recognize that these examples involve very long spans of time, but we also know that cultural change is more rapid now, and the important thing is the nature of the process that we image for ourselves. If we take possibility and transformation seriously, if we pay more than lip service to the poet's talk about being available to any shape that God is summoning through us, or the confidence the poet has in the dearest freshness deep down things that will bring a new dawn by means of the Holy Spirit's brooding—if we let these images govern our life as the ELCA, we will know that the evolution of the DNA molecule and of the Habiru culture are more authoritative for our sense of our future than the bottom-lineism that dictates so much of our lives today.

—Fourth, we will recall the foundational metaphors of our faith tradition that pertain to transformation: the Exodus, the wandering in the wilderness, the clay on the potter's wheel, the shoots from the stump of Jesse, the life of availability lived by Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the promise of the New Jerusalem. These are not soft metaphors. They speak of loss and grief over the losses that transformation inevitably brings, they speak of hardship and discipline—also basic to the journey. They speak of death. But they also interpret loss, hardship, and death as stages of life, whose deepest meaning is revealed in resurrection. Theosis is the fulfillment of that resurrection reality.

Our spirituality on the journey is that of availability to God's possibilities through transformation. In what follows, I turn to two concrete forms the journey for the ELCA might take.

The Community of Possibility: Belonging without Conditions

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The story of Chickenpops

The story of Chickenpops is one person's story of how she encountered God in a local ELCA congregation. Let me recount the story in the very words of the woman who told it to me. Her name is Inge Lempp. She is a seminary student who not only did her field work in this congregation, but also lived in its neighborhood.

"I have this encounter with God back in my neighborhood in Chicago, in West Garfield Park, every time I meet Chickenpops on the street or in Sunday School. Chickenpops is a boy of the age of seven or eight. His real name is Dennis, we found out months after we had first met him. We met him in our "Take back the streets" campaign in September. [This campaign is an effort of the congregation to protest drug dealing and gang activity in their neighborhood with marches to the places where that activity is most prevalent. Worship in the streets is also a feature of this congregation's "Take back the streets" campaign.] He came to all the activities we held and stayed until the very end, often past midnight. He lives two houses down from the church. He introduced himself to us as "Chickenpops" with a big warm smile and such a sense of normality, not even aware that there might be some questioning about his name. He insisted then and insists to this day that he be called by that name. Whenever I even get near the church, if he spies me from afar, I hear my name ringing through the air, see his raggedy bike flying down the street and before I know it he is right in front of me, his hands wrapped around me in a tightly squeezed hug, demanding that the hug be returned. Every time it catches me by surprise and it fills me with such joy—he makes my day. Chickenpops is a restless child, his movements are jerky and uncoordinated. His speech is slurred and often very hard to understand. Most likely his mom was on drugs and/or alcohol when she was pregnant with him, and there seems to be a possibility that he was lead-poisoned from the old dilapidated house he lives in. His mom does not appear in this story; we know nothing about her. There is an angry, aggressive, unkempt grandmother and some dubious looking aunts and uncles that hang out in the house where Chickenpops lives. It is a house filled with so-called "druggies,"

most of them users and perhaps small-time sellers. The only stable relationships among Chickenpops' close relatives are his grandmother's sister and his sister, who is just a little older than he is; they live in his house, too. Chickenpops has all the odds against him that a young boy growing up in an American city can have—drugs, no father or mother, lead-poisoning, being a "drug baby." There is something about him, however, that exudes the presence of God—the lively sparkling eyes, his indomitable excitement, his demanding of unconditional, unfiltered, direct love and affection catch me every time by surprise and give me pause, to think about whose presence it is in which I am standing. I am not the only one who feels this and encounters it from Chickenpops. Several others have commented on this amazing encounter, even without my sharing my experience of the boy.

"Let me share another incident with Chickenpops. Last Sunday, in our Sunday School, we had difficulty understanding his request that we sing a certain song that he had chosen. We hadn't sung the song in months, but he remembered it and wanted us to sing it. The words of the song are:

Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us
for we need you to help us find our way.
Gentle Shepherd, come and feed us
for we need your strength from day
to day.
There's no other we can turn to
who will help us face another day.
Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us,
for we need you to help us find our way.

Chickenpops stood in front of the entire Sunday School with the Superintendent, leading the song. None of the movements he made with his mouth even came close to any words of the song he had chosen. His coordination was very bad this day. But Chickenpops was singing at the top of his lungs, and there was no doubt that he knew of whom and to whom he was singing. This expression of utter trust and faith in that Shepherd of his was so apparent."

The reality of belonging

Several aspects of this story impress themselves upon me as signals of the community of God's possibilities that I want to focus upon in this lecture. First of all, this is a story of a local congregation in which *belonging* is forcefully real. Chickenpops expresses the belonging in his effervescent affection that is so physically expressed, but it is also real in the response he elicits from others. Although a new person in the church and seriously disabled, he sees the church as his community, to which he contributes his presence and on which he can make certain claims—he can request a song be sung, and he can lead the community in the singing.

The belonging is unconditional, partly because he demands that it be so, he exhibits it in his affection for others, and also because he is so physically dysfunctional and disabled that he could tolerate only very few conditions placed upon him. However, and this is most impressive to me, despite his horrible plight, his relationship of belonging in the congregation is not as a "sick" person, nor does he strike the pose of a welfare recipient who might be termed a "rice Christian." This is reciprocal—he does not present himself as a sick claimant of services, and he is not received by the congregation as such. The belonging relationship that is actual in this story is governed by joy, by affection, by praise and thanksgiving. Furthermore, it is a relationship of belonging in which amazing, unpredictable possibilities are revealed in a trans-

forming way. No hospital record or social worker's report would suggest that a destitute, rejected African American boy, without parents or other loving caretakers, suffering from "crack baby" syndrome and lead-poisoning, would be able to enter into relationships that evoke love and joy from those around him, nor that he would galvanize the worship of his Sunday School. It is totally unpredictable that this boy would reveal the possibilities for joy and affection and celebration that would compel others to say that he was a vessel of God's joyous presence.

Chickenpops' extraordinary impact and gifts to his Christian friends would not and does not exist, however, apart from a community and the belonging that it exhibits. Community and belonging are the medium in which this unfolding of possibilities and the presence of God are revealed. Furthermore, it may have all begun in an act of social ministry and witness, when the congregation testified through action that it belonged to its neighborhood and that its neighborhood belonged to God, not to drug dealers and gang hoodlums.

The plan of this part. I have already laid the foundation for our reflections on the church with the theme, the church as God's well of possibility [p. 245]. In this part, I concentrate on one feature of the present passage which we must traverse. I give this feature of our passage a name: Community of belonging without conditions. It is a feature that the story of Chickenpops embodies.

Belonging: our passage into the future

The community of unconditional belonging is a basic element of our current cultural situation, the world over. The search for such community is not new, it is perennial, and it is universal. It is as fundamental to the situation in which the church ministers as anything else we can mention. Community marked by unconditional belonging is central to the shape of the present; it constitutes the passage which our past identity must negotiate in its movement toward the future of its possibilities. We observed in the previous lecture that, as passage, the present gives character to the fulfillment of our possibilities. Whatever we think our identity to be as the ELCA and whatever we believe its future to be, they cannot be actual for us apart from the community of unconditional belonging.

Understanding the present. Since we presently have not yet realized this unconditional belonging in our existence, it stands over against us as a possibility to be actualized. Beyond that, however, it is also the seedbed for the fruition of our possibilities. Affirming the possibilities that are inherent in its belonging to its neighborhood, the congregation in our opening story discovered that neighborhood belonging nurtured further possibilities, including those that involved Chickenpops.

When we understand this about our present situation, we recognize also that it is not only passage, but that it can also be the matrix of God's enablement and empowerment for our future. This tells us even more about how we should understand our present, how it is far more than simply an environment to which we must adapt in order to survive. To view the present situation in such survivalist terms is not incorrect, but it is inadequate.

Paul Tillich understood the present situation as the medium in which human existence voices its most basic questions, the questions to which the gospel must speak a response, if the gospel is truly to be gospel. The present utters the questions to which

the church must respond if it is to be church. Joseph Sittler spoke of the gospel as melody and the contemporary cultural situation as the counterpoint in which that melody occurs. The melody has no meaning apart from its counterpoint, and the contrapuntal context is also devoid of meaning without the melody.

All of these witnesses, Heidegger in his portrayal of the dialectic of transformation, Tillich and Sittler, impress upon us that our present situation is not external to what the gospel is as gospel, nor to what the church is as church. The present situation in which we live is not simply the target to which we aim evangelical ammunition. Rather, the present is also God's creation, in relationship with which gospel and church are transformed by the Creator God to become what they are called to be. I ask you to consider two specific interpretations of how the present shares in God's creation and in God's future for that creation, viewed in relation to the gospel and to the church.

The interpretation of the present situation which I am proposing seeks to criticize and deepen the survivalist approach to the present. This survivalist mentality is widespread around and within our church. A good deal of what we hear about the challenge of the evangelical churches and the megachurches is survivalist in tone, and the same is true of much of what we hear about the secularist challenge. The survivalist mentality shapes our talk about our Lutheran identity as the ELCA. The identity-anxiety that we have been suffering from for the past few years is often a plea for an identity that will survive the onslaughts of the current situation in which we live. Such anxiety is understandable, but at the end of the day, if our anxiety for survival is not conditioned by attention to God's possibilities for us, it is not worthy of the church of Jesus Christ.

The present situation in which we live is not simply the target to which we aim evangelical ammunition.

Besides the survivalist mentality, there is another position that I criticize in my approach to the present: the view that the present cultural situation is so dismal, so demonic, so obsessed with domination, profit, and pleasure that the church must declare the situation to be nothing less than the kingdom of Satan and shape its ministry accordingly. If the survivalist anxiety is understandable, once we recognize the fear of failure, so, too, the need for prophetic denunciation can be appreciated for its keen awareness of the profound and genuine evil that marks our current situation. Demonizing the situation we live in, however, is not adequate for ministry, either. Later I will elaborate Paul Tillich's understanding of the demonic as that which is initially good, but which has turned against itself. The term "demonic" is a synonym neither for Satan nor for evil.

I suggest that however we evaluate the current situation in which we live, we ought to read it carefully, as if it were a text, in order to discern the fundamental questions and cries that it utters. It is in response to those questions and cries that the church will invest itself in ways that are obedient to God's work of bringing forth possibilities for both the church and its situation.

If we listen carefully to these questions

and cries, and if we earnestly attempt the most discerning interpretation of what we hear and read, we will not pander to the situation in the interests of survival, nor will we simply authorize everything we find in the situation, just as we will not write off the human substance that is coming to expression in the situation. Rather, the church will acknowledge the authenticity of the questions and the cries and respond in ways that transform the situation beyond what the situation itself can imagine and in directions that are quite different from the world's expectation. The church will enter into the situation in which it has been planted and share in God's transformation through the medium of the present situation of the possibilities that it holds.

My proposal does not lose sight of the fact that the situation in which we live is also God's creation, for which Jesus Christ lived and died, and which God will never abandon. This essay represents some my conclusions after listening to our times and reading them as text.

The shape of the cry for belonging in our time

Belonging and community do not occur in the abstract, but only in concrete embodiments that are incarnated in the stuff and shape of the times in which they live. I call attention to three significant shaping forces in our time that leave their mark on belonging and community: technology, intensified pluralism, and the yearning for unity.

1. Technology. In concert with the economic, social, and psychological consequences that come with it, technology has radically reshaped the contexts and the capabilities for belonging and community in our times. Urbanization, high tech communications, breakdown of the extended family, population increase, dislocation of agricultural employment, capacity for violence, war and destruction, medical procedures that force new and traumatic questions upon persons, the patterns and media of recreation and entertainment, styles of education and employment—all of these phenomena and more have emerged from the possibilities that are opened up by technology in its many forms.

Every one of these phenomena has a direct bearing on the shape of belonging and community. Some examples: belonging in an urban environment is different in form than belonging in a small rural town; belonging in a neighborhood where armed violence comes as easy as sandlot baseball is different than in a setting where fists, bloody noses, and slingshots are the chief means for acting out aggression; belonging in a marriage and in an extended family in which a painful decision for abortion has to be made in the second month of pregnancy is different from the situation in which every birth is unpredictable until it happens in its term. We know how different belonging in community is when all the adults in a family are caught up in work and careers five or six days in every week.

2. Intensification of pluralism. Pluralism is not separable from technology. It is technology that has enabled the means of communication that make us aware of nearly all the plural groups in our own society and throughout the world. Saint Thomas, in the twelfth century, wrote a treatise against the pagans, although he never in his lifetime met a pagan—he was writing against an abstraction. Martin Luther was in a comparable situation when he wrote against "the Turks." Technology not only makes it possible for us to know about pluralism, it also makes it possible and necessary for pluralism to move into our neighborhoods

and rub elbows with us.

Pluralism also changes the shape of the terrain on which belonging and community happen. We recognize that in the evolution of human beings, from earliest times to the present, interaction with the "other," whether it is the individual other or the tribal or ethnic other, has been difficult for us to negotiate. The main strategy for interaction has been built on the presupposition of each person or group having its own turf. In United States society, and even in the global human community, owning one's own turf is increasingly problematic and not even possible. Who owns the turf of the local public school? All the citizens do, so none of them can pursue their own tribe's prayer life, dress code, or language use. How does one belong to a grouping that in principle cannot indulge public practice of one's tribal customs? Even more difficult, how does a community fashion forms of belonging that allow every plural person or group to be themselves and yet belong to the entire community?

3. The unquenchable yearning for unity. What does this situation of belonging-under-the-conditions-of-technology-and-plurality really mean? What is going on in this dynamic situation? It is useful, in fact necessary, that we make some attempt to understand and interpret the deeper significance of the current situation. I have found the suggestions made some decades ago by the French Jesuit and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to be most insightful. Teilhard understood the dynamics of our time to be a dialectical rhythm in which unity and plurality emerge. He saw unity rooted in the basic biological structure of the human being—despite our differences, we possess the same genetic make-up and brains; the diversity of genes and brains that we often emphasize occurs within an even more impressive oneness of the species. Teilhard also perceived unity rooted in the one global ecosystem that all humans must deal with. The planet is a sphere, which means finally no single individual or group can flee from the rest of the human community—to some isolated corner or edge of the earth. Every tribe's turf ultimately runs into every other tribe's turf. Under the impact of technological enhancement, the awareness of all the other members of the global human community has grown exponentially. Through the technologies of travel, exploration, and communication nearly everyone on the planet can know about the entire planet and all of its people and other forms of life. Through television, the apes of Zaire can spend the afternoon in homes all around the world, and the suffering of the Ruwandans is dinner table fare all around the world. As the astronauts provided us photos of the one planet that is our mother, so travel and television provide us pictures of the one living community that exists on that planet.

Teilhard understood, however, that the closer and more intense our awareness of the *entire* global village becomes, the more intense our perception of the diversity of that village becomes. Before we came to know that our one global village includes Somalian tribal leaders and Iranian Shiites, we never knew how different the two are from each other and how different most of us are from both of them. Before we knew how different they are, as evidenced in the Teheran hostage crisis and the Somalian intervention, we never understood how much Iranians, Somalians, and United States Americans are intertwined in their lives and belong to each other. The entire world—past and present—is a stage now, and every conceivable sort of identity demands that it have a place on the stage—identities defined by ethnicity, by culture, by oppres-

sion, by gender, by physical ability or disability, by sexual preference, by social-political philosophy—the definitions go on and on.

One might image the world as a stage on which all sorts and conditions of people have always been standing, but on which only a few received the beam of the public spotlight, while others remained unseen in the shadows. In our time, the lights have gone on all over the theater, and everyone can see everyone else—the stage is full; even the audience is on the stage. Furthermore, everyone on the stage demands not just to be seen, but to be allowed to be who they are.

However much we play unity and diversity off against each other, they are part of the same movement of history. It is only because of our technologically enhanced sense of unity that we are aware of our diversities. It is only because of the tensions created by our diversities that we recognize how much we belong to each other in interdependence. If we did not belong to each other in some sort of unity, no American soldier would ever have been sent to Somalia. If it were not for the diversities among us and the concomitant tensions, no American soldier would have had to be sent to Somalia and die there. Cornel West makes this same point in his analysis of the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, in the wake of the Rodney King affair:

> The Los Angeles upheaval forces us to see not only that we are not connected in ways we would like to be but also, in a more profound sense, that this failure to connect binds us even more tightly together. *The paradox of race in America is that our common destiny is more pronounced and imperiled precisely when our divisions are deeper.*[8]

It is important, therefore, to appreciate the diversities of the world and to be cognizant of how they interrelate to the unity of a larger belonging. Diversity is perceivable only against the backdrop of unity, and unity can be recognized only from within the matrix that is constituted by diversity. Today we are aware, however, that what I have called the unquenchable human yearning for unity is a rich, multi-faceted network of belonging. Let us now consider several dimensions of belonging that make up our lives today in the world and in the church.

The breadth of belonging

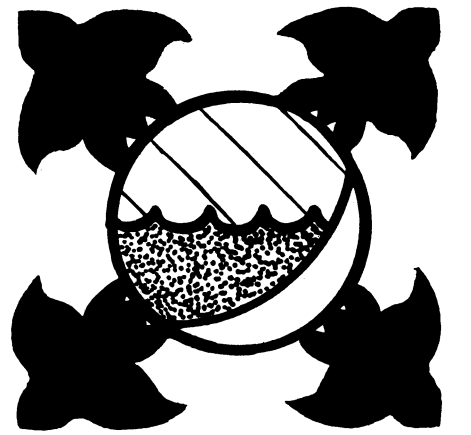
1. Ecology: belonging to the rest of nature. I share two vignettes from the recent past. A rancher in the far West is penalized for grazing his cattle on lands that have been declared wilderness area and thus off limits except under special conditions; his response, "I never thought America would come to this, denying me and my cattle what rightfully belongs to us." A woman on the East coast, upon hearing that her application for a permit for a commercial building on waterfront property that she owned had been denied on grounds that it was ecologically improper, shouts angrily in an interview, "They have no right to deny me my God-given privileges on the land that belongs to me."

These vignettes may be interpreted from several vantage points, but I call attention here to how they appear when viewed from the perspective of belonging in community. The fundamental instinct that drives the government regulations in each of these incidents is rooted in the sense that we who are the human community in the United States belong to the land as much as it belongs to us. Regulations exist for the purpose of honoring the value of the land, as

[8] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 4.

our partner, in the relationship of belonging. For some that is a value intrinsic to the land, for others it is the value that accrues from the land as belonging to God and the creation, for others it is the value of human survival that is dependent on the land remaining intact. For still others, a concept of the common good, the good of all citizens, is at stake here. The rancher and the landowner's comments also use the word, "belong." Their comments underscore the many-splendored meaning of that word. The rancher has a sense of belonging to America and America belonging to him, but it is a sense that he and America stand over against the land, and that America betrays its commitment to him when it acknowledges our belonging to the land over against his rights to use the land as he wishes. The landowner speaks from a sense of her own personal belonging, stemming from the rights of property ownership, which give the land to her and also provide for her complete freedom to do what she will with it. The larger community, the United States, has declared war on her by insisting that there is a relationship of belonging to the land that overrides the relationship of belonging that proceeds from legal property ownership.

These vignettes reveal the richness and ambiguity of the concept of belonging, and they also demonstrate that there is a breadth of belonging that we have not always perceived with acuity in our personal and public lives. If the church is a community of belonging, its life will intersect this breadth of understanding. The dimension of belonging that is illuminated here is, of course, what we call today ecological belonging, our relationship to the rest of nature. It is not yet a conventional view, even though it is growing more prominent. On the one hand, not so many in the church consider nature to be a religious consideration, while, on the



other hand, not so many define our relationship to nature as one of belonging in community. Since it is novel for us, this notion of belonging may be a useful interpretive proposal for understanding the reality of the church in new ways.

This may seem to be an activist proposal, to rally the troops for the environmental movement. That would be laudable, but that is not my point here. The sense of a belonging relationship to the rest of nature bespeaks a worldview, a faith-picture of reality and ourselves in it. Joseph Sittler underscored this point when he said that since God creates and redeems all of creation, our relationship to nature is a Christological one, remembering that a cosmic Christ is our redeemer. Elizabeth Bettenhausen reminds us of the importance of such reflections in a stunning manner:

> Human beings are inextricably interdependent with all other aspects of earth. This ecological reality cannot be dismissed when considering the well-being of the human community in religious terms. Salvation does not end Adam's status as earth-creature. Human well-being is impossible without earth-well-being. The ecological well-being of earth is integral to redemption

> and sanctification.... The paucity of reference in the creeds to the earth-base of all community is dangerous today.... The "giver of life" gives not only human life and certainly not only Christian life. In ecological perspective all life and so-called non-living reality are interdependent. Thus, the life-giving work of the Spirit and the creative and sanctifying work of God are different human designations of the same phenomenon. Ecclesiology which neglects ecology is deadly.[9]

Before nature becomes an object of social-political action, it enters into the structure of our understanding what it means to be human as a creature of God in Christ. Consequently, nature is an item of ecclesiology. In the framework of these lectures, nature is a dimension of that to which we belong without condition. Nature, within the purview of the evolutionary process, has lavished her resources upon us, enabling our lives, and has asked little of us except that we function well enough to survive. We are asked, in return, to acknowledge our belonging with nature in the same spirit of unconditional generosity.

The breadth of our belonging encompasses our relationships with the rest of nature, the non-human realm. One of the great challenges that faces us today is how we interrelate this dimension to our belonging within the human community. We now turn our attention to this facet of our belonging.

2. *Multiculturality and social ministry: sociocultural belonging.* No emphasis has invaded our public rhetoric more in the United States, both within the church and outside it, than that of "multiculturality." As with ecology, the most prevalent response is to consider multiculturality a moral and ecclesiological mandate, which it certainly is. I suggest, however, that it is also a structure of our understanding, of our very nature as creatures of God who have been redeemed by Christ. If we accept the challenge to foster multiculturality, then we have already exhibited a prior relationship of belonging to those cultures, whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

Once again, I recall some vignettes. A visit to the Barnes Foundation in suburban Philadelphia, to view Dr. Barnes' amazing collection of art and equally stunning presentation of his collection, teaches the visitor how deeply Western painting has drunk from the well of African culture. For example, if you are, like me, an admirer of Modigliani's marvelous faces, you are equally an admirer of the African mask art from which Modigliani drew inspiration. It is better known, perhaps, that if you are a devotee of rock music, you have already received a legacy of African American culture. Equally, as Cornel West reminds us forcefully in his *Race Matters*, if you have enjoyed the benefits of American society, particularly economic benefits, you have declared your dependence on the cultures of the African Americans, the Latinos and the Asians whose labor, often even today nearly slave labor, has been indispensable to the economic accomplishment of our nation.

These examples which describe the cultural aspect of our multicultural belonging go hand-in-hand with other examples that underscore the sociological aspect of that belonging. The take-back-the-streets campaign of which Chickenpops was a part is a dramatic testimony to this belonging. Sociological belonging encompasses issues that relate to what we might call *social justice* and also to what is termed the *common good.* Approaching these rubrics from

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[9] Elizabeth Bettenhausen, "Creation," in *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (*Tro & Tanke*, 1995, no. 5; Uppsala, Sweden: Svenska kyrkans forskningsrød), 88-89.

the perspective of belonging throws light on particular facets of both.

Social justice is a matter of alleviating or eliminating evil situations; it is also a response to Jesus' command to love God and our neighbor, just as it is the cultivation of cultural values that are important to us. Social justice is a dimension of our context of belonging and thus of the past identity that responds to the future in which that identity will be transformed. Social justice concern in our local neighborhoods and communities exhibits our sensitivity to the matrix of our belonging as much as consulting with a physician shows our concern for the body which is ours. Insensitivity to justice issues in our community expresses our weak bond of belonging to that community and its physical placement. The commonplace relocation of congregations underscores either the low priority that is given to the particularities of belonging, or to the inability to belong to certain situations. Conversely, strong social justice concern and action are first of all neither a matter of good being done for a community nor a matter of righteous performance. Much more they are expressions of our belonging and the importance of that belonging to us. Beyond the local neighborhood, justice concerns for the larger society, even in far parts of the world, is an articulation of our belonging. The ultimate model of this belonging is, of course, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, in which God expressed a fundamental covenant belongingness to the creation that God had also conceived and brought into actuality. Recalling my earlier reference to Gregory Nazianzen, God did not relocate out of the human incarnation on the grounds that the human situation was untenable or too hopeless. The life and death of Jesus portray the career of divine love whenever it refuses to deny its covenant belongingness to the creation.

Concern for the common good is a critical dimension for life in the Untied States today, and throughout the world. Although it is most often overlooked in the public discussion today, the turmoil we are witnessing on issues of federal entitlements, health care, insurance, tax reform, government regulation, and the interaction between local forms of government and larger

Insensitivity to justice issues in our community expresses our weak bond of belonging to that community and its physical placement.

units of the same—these are all important testimonies of how different it is for us to understand what belonging means for us in the present time. The questions of entitlements to the poor, the disabled, and to other segments of society, as well as those of taxes, regulation, and health care insurance all orbit around the issue of whether we belong to each other and how we belong. Do we belong to the land and our natural resources intimately enough that our private use of them should be regulated for the common good? Do those who achieve affluence and wealth belong to the social nexus that enabled their success, and do the proceeds of their success also belong in some way to that social nexus or not? This facet of the debate over tax reform entitlements ought not be ignored. Is our health in

this society strictly an individual matter of luck and life style, or are illness and health, early death and longevity, genetic defect and genetic soundness all linked together in the network of social belonging or not?

> Our future is the future of a church that is incarnated in this society, here and now.

This dimension of the health care and insurance debate ought not be shoved under the rug. Do the affluent belong to the poor, and the poor to the affluent? Does business belong to the employees and to the public, and the employees and the public to the business? These are all questions of the common good, of our belongingness. Furthermore, they are all questions that the church must discuss, if it understands itself as truly belonging to a particular piece of the world for which God cared enough to become incarnate in Christ.

Beyond the economic, political, sociological, and psychological perspectives on multi-culturality, the church will consider an *ecclesiology of belonging*. Such an ecclesiology is integral for understanding who we are and our passage into what we will become as church, by the grace of God. The church is not an unconnected, isolated island of catholic and Lutheran traditions that defy the smudge and smell of belonging to a neighborhood and to a society that God cares about. We cannot for a moment reflect on the future that God wills for the ELCA without recognizing that our future is the future of a church that is incarnated in this society, here and now, in the particular shape that it is assuming here and now. Our identity is interwoven with this society, and this society is the present place and time in which we act out our hope for the future. To turn away from this fact is to deny the ambience of our belonging and to opt out of the incarnation that God opted for in Christ.

These reflections on sociocultural themes do not aim only at activism for social justice. Rather they underscore the context of belonging that is intrinsic to who we are as a church and who we are called to become—driven by the possibilities that God has placed within us and which God is transforming for the future. Action is essential, but here I focus on the worldview that grounds such action.

We have given attention to two dimensions of belonging as the church, nature and society. A third dimension, which is multifaceted in itself, is that of belonging to persons.

3. I and Thou: belonging to all persons. In our tradition, we most often emphasize the church as a community of persons. Luther's summary of the third article of the creed from his Large Catechism stands foremost in much of our discussion of the church: "I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ."[10] This understanding of the church is also reflected in Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession.[11] Despite the sentimentality that often accompanies our retrieval of this idea, and even though it

[10] In Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1959), 417.

[11] Tappert, 33.

does not encompass all that we believe about the church, it is certainly central to what we believe. Belonging is also central to this understanding of the church. In his 1519 treatise, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ," Luther speaks of this community gathered around the altar as a kind of city, with persons of high estate and low, from all occupations and ages.[12] Further, in Luther's view, every person shares equally the risks and the benefits of the city. The citizens belong to one another. This eucharistic community was not only a microcosm of the larger society, it was called to include all of the society.

The ELCA has adopted mission goals that seek to be faithful to this basic Lutheran teaching about the church. Intentions of inclusiveness of gender, race, and social placement have been enunciated by our church since its formation in 1988. This traditional picture of the church has been shattered, however, by the increasing technologically and demographically driven pluralism of U.S. society. In no other segment of our tradition is it more clear that Luther and the churches that grew out of his movement lived in a social matrix that was stunningly different than ours in its monocultural character. There is real diversity in his town of Wittenberg, exemplified by economic and social class differences and also by its high percentage of Jewish inhabitants. However, the societal matrix in which this diversity occurs is so different, and that difference is so consequential, that we are forced to conclude that there is no straight line from Luther to the ELCA when it comes to understanding the church as community of persons.

I will underscore three elements that constitute the belonging of persons to one another: the barriers of economic and social class, the diversity of personal identities, and tension between ministry to persons and public ministry.

(a) Economic and social class. It may be that most of the northern European Lutheran immigrants who came to the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were of the peasant and working classes, but over the generations their churches became middle class congregations, including successful farmers. In the fourth quarter of our century, new trends have appeared that make economic and social class placement in our society as divisive and entrapping as they were in the societies from which our immigrant ancestors came.

Sociologists have observed for a long time that our society prefers the fiction that social class distinctions are unimportant and perhaps even absent from our life. We know better. Empirical studies of social class differences and their interpretations have been published by top rank scholars at least since the 1930s.[13] After the Second World War, our society maintained its stratification, but made great progress in narrowing the gap between rich and poor and, even more importantly, of creating a so-called safety net that raised the lowest level beyond which the poor could fall.

Since the late 1970s, however, much more disturbing trends have set in. In the United States, the gap between rich and poor has increased faster than in any other industrialized society. Even more disturbing, among these same societies, ours is the only one in which the plight of the poor is becoming worse, the safety net deteriorating, so that as the rich become richer, the poor actually become poorer. This trend

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[12] In Helmut Lehman, ed., *Luther's Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 35:51-2.

[13] Dennis Gilbert and Joseph A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure: A New Synthesis* (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1982).

means that a church like the ELCA, which is so firmly ensconced in the middle and upper-middle classes, is increasingly alienated from the large population of the lower economic and social classes and even more from the poor. It is increasingly difficult for our church to minister to these persons who live outside the dominant social class placement as members of our communities. We are more and more inclined to minister to them as recipients of our social welfare rather than as brothers and sisters around the altar of Holy Communion, as companions for our children and youth in church activities, as members of congregational committees, and the like. Persons—men, women, and children—from the lower end of the economic and social class ladder simply are not present in our local church communities, except in unusual circumstances. Sunday schools where Chickenpops can lead the singing are rare in the ELCA. Note once again that I am not raising these issues primarily as concerns of justice and social welfare, although they are that. I am underscoring their significance as issues of belonging, and in particular, of persons belonging to each other as persons. In this respect, I am not calling for the church to develop a social welfare policy directed at the poor, but I am asking how we can nurture personal belonging across social class boundaries, how our altars can indeed gather around them a macrocosm of the society, as Luther took for granted in his demographically quite different situation.

I believe that the destructiveness and suffering heaped upon persons by economic and social class division in the United States may well be known in the next century as our own "confessing church" problem. In Germany under Hitler, the churches brought disgrace upon themselves for their failure to recognize the anti-Jewish policies of the society and make efforts to counter them. The Confessing Church emerged from a remnant of the churches and did work underground against Hitler's policies and did attempt to serve the needs of the Jews. Even today, the mainstream churches bear the stigma of their failure, and the Confessing Church stands as a courageous attempt to be the authentic church under Hitler. Thirty years from now we may well find our churches falling under a similar judgment of history. Millions of Americans are becoming increasingly poor and disenfranchised. What record of protest and ministry have our churches presented in the face of this trend?

Economic and social class condition decisively the context in which belonging happens or does not happen today. Other important forms of diversity among persons also play a critical role in the landscape of belonging today.

(b) The diversity of personal identities. The term "personal identities" covers a broad area. I mean to refer to the identity of race, gender, sexual preference, family situation, and the like. These are the issues of the current debate over "political correctness," and I have no interest in entering into that debate here. The specifics of this issue are well known, and I shall not reiterate them. Rather, I focus on the fact that a community of belonging in the United States today will unavoidably be a community of individual persons who embody this diversity, unless the communities intentionally define themselves in a more homogeneous manner and make themselves inhospitable to those who fall outside the definition. The body of thought that goes under the name "church growth" seems to endorse a kind of grassroots *apartheid*, arguing that homogeneous communities attract newcomers of the same ilk and thus grow faster and more smoothly than do heterogeneous communities. I do not view this matter from a perspective of

what makes for growth, but rather of what makes for the kind of belonging that—in my judgment—our society needs and craves today; I speak as well from the perspective of the gospel and Luther's interpretation of the community that is the church.

In a time and in a society where racism is still a pervasive fact of life that corrodes both our national character and our individual wholesomeness, the church must find ways in which to affirm our belonging as persons across the racial divide. The same must be said about the divisions between men and women and between the "straight" and the gay/lesbian persons. We now know from our experience that none of these identities is a barrier to God's spirit becoming present in persons. The trouble is that our church communities so seldom acknowledge what God can do and is doing in, with, and under the diversity of human identity. Until our local and national communities find ways to nurture the belonging of persons to each other across these barriers, God's work of transformation in the ELCA will be obstructed by our disobedience.

(c) Ministry to persons and public ministry. There is a real but mostly unacknowledged dilemma that becomes more threatening every day to the ministry of our pastors and our congregations in the ELCA. The pastor is expected to be a role model for the public philosophy and morality of the ELCA and of the local congregation. At the same time, the pastor also is regularly called upon to minister to persons who are not able to conform to that philosophy and morality and to welcome them to the community of word and sacrament and fellowship of the congregation. As a consequence a genuine tension arises between the pastor's public position and the actual ministry that is shared with individual persons who are on the fringe of or outside the public philosophy and morality.

Let me give some examples. The public philosophy and morality of the ELCA is generally opposed to abortion. However, more and more women are faced with the decision of abortion, sometimes to satisfy what appears to the outsider to be personal convenience, but increasingly because of genetic abnormalities that are detected in the early months of pregnancy. We know a number of things about such pregnancies: the severity of the consequences of the abnormality is not always unambiguously clear, as in the case of spina bifida and Down's syndrome; the care required for some abnormal births brought to term, as in Down's syndrome, may be affordable in some affluent families but will bankrupt others; the divorce rate among couples who receive the news of genetic abnormality is in the neighborhood of 90% (50% in the population as a whole), largely because men find it impossible to handle the prospect of a defective birth.

Are pastors obligated to oppose abortion in all of these cases? Are pastors free to assure the persons who must decide about abortion that there will be pastoral support, whatever the decision, even if the pastor personally disagrees with the decision? Will the congregation support pastors who have committed themselves to minister to the mother and father regardless of their decision? If such persons are members of the congregation, will the congregation welcome them to the eucharistic fellowship, the social fellowship, and other full participation? How will pastors present themselves publicly in the face of this tension? What will they preach in their sermons? Informal evidence indicates that relatively few parishioners counsel with their pastor prior to an abortion decision. Is this because they are uncertain and fearful about the stance the pastor and their fellow Christians in the congregation will take?

Lutheran theological tradition, at its foundations, does not provide an unambiguous support for the kind of community that our times call for at the deepest level.

Another example: our public philosophy and morality oppose suicide. Increasingly, however, in the face of great chronic pain caused by terminal illness and also in the face of the deterioration of dementia that is so destructive both of the ill persons and of the loved ones they live with, persons are considering the prospect of self-termination or doctor-assisted suicide. The impact on pastoral and congregational ministry is comparable in this example to the previous one. How will pastors and congregations present themselves in such situations, particularly to those persons who have not yet faced these difficult decisions, but who will be predisposed to relate or not to relate to their pastors and congregations on the basis of the treatment they perceive they will receive? Closely related to this issue, and even more prevalent, is the question of prolonging life by modern medical techniques that were unknown to previous generations, even in circumstances where little more than the barest rudiments of life remain and genuine quality of life has vanished.

Still another example: although our church supports pastoral ministry to homosexuals, it frowns upon the sexual behavior that is natural to homosexuals, and it mostly shares our society's ambivalence about equal rights for gays and lesbians. Will congregations receive gays and lesbians into the fellowship if they are aware of their identity? Will eucharistic and social fellowship be welcomed? Will gays and lesbians be welcomed as Sunday School teachers, youth workers, and the like? Will pastors be encouraged to keep the identity of gays and lesbians in the congregation secret, and will the persons themselves be counseled to remain in the closet in their relationships with the congregation? Will a congregation support pastors who encourage openness toward gays and lesbians?

I argue that belonging without conditions is a deep yearning within the human community today, and that the cry is heard under the forms that emerge from our cultural and social existence today. What I have described, in brief, is complex and rich beyond our ability to probe exhaustively. With the cursory view I have provided, we move on to the theological perspectives that are central and unique to the Lutheran church, as it seeks to be church in the context of the contemporary cry for belonging.

Belonging without conditions and the Lutheran theological tradition

1. The challenge to our weakness. I have already elaborated at some length the ways in which diversity interfaces with our Lutheran church at points of our weakness, rather than at our strengths, and I commented on what difference this makes. I believe very earnestly that the same is true of our interface with the challenge of community as belonging without conditions.

We will not want to acknowledge this, because such community is so central to what it means to be Christian, so central to both the Old Testament and the New, that it seems almost a matter of moral and spiritual disgrace to say that our tradition is not naturally graced with the propensity for community as our top priority. There is another reason we will not gladly acknowledge our difficulties with community without conditions: that presently we do have strong communities and our public rhetoric is full of concern for community. Clearly, the ELCA and all of the previous Lutheran tradition recognizes that community is central and we desire to nurture it at a fundamental level. We will not bring this recognition and desire to fruition, however, unless we acknowledge with equal clarity that the Lutheran theological tradition, at its foundations, does not provide an unambiguous support for the kind of community that our times call for at the deepest level. Let me explain.

2. *Truth as a Reformation priority.* For Lutherans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, community was a given in ways that it is not for us today. They did not have to create new communities, nor was diversity a factor in their communities in the way it is for us today. The church that they came from, which they inherited, was already in existence, its community structures and consciousness firmly rooted in generations of practice and theory. Since the history of the Lutheran churches in these centuries was governed by the support of regular governments, princes and kings, those churches could rely on prior ecclesiastical structures of community, as well as civil structures and official approval. Indeed, we cannot understand this history if we do not remember that Luther and his colleagues emerged within the period of Western culture known as the *corpus christianum*, one Christian body, in which all the structures of society and all the citizens of society except for the Jews were in place and publicly Christian. There was no religious alternative to the Western Christian church. The Lutherans of the sixteenth century defined themselves by their distinctiveness within the structures of their societies on which they could rely for their churchly existence. Our context is quite different, and it has been for generations.

For reasons that are too comprehensive and complex to elaborate here, as Lutheranism in its early generations sought to understand itself more fully and also to defend its distinctiveness within the *corpus christianum*, it identified the true Christianity to which Lutheran churches were committed with one central theological idea. It also judged all of church history and the Christianity of any particular epoch by the correct perception and teaching of this idea. In his classic work, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings*, Robert Wilken clarifies how this emphasis on one idea rightly propounded shaped the Lutheran defense of itself from the very earliest times in the sixteenth century, as spelled out in fullest terms by Flacius in his multi-volumned history of the church.[14] Flacius' work, done in collaboration with a team of Lutheran historians, *The Magdeburg Centuries*, appeared in 1559; it was the most comprehensive church history ever produced up to that time. The point of Flacius' work was to defend the Reformation, particularly against the Roman church, by demonstrating that the Reformation faith was not an aberration, as its enemies charged, but actually a witness to what the main

[14] Robert L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings: History's Impact on Belief* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 107-18.

stream of faithful Christians had always believed. Wilken observes that Flacius set himself a hard task, and that his work did not match the historical standards of the Roman Catholic response, Baronius' multi-volumned *Ecclesiastical Annals*. Flacius was working against great odds, because he had to funnel all of history through the spigot of one idea, justification, and he had to manipulate the rich data of history that did not spill naturally through his spigot.

3. Truth and community as priorities: Article Seven of the Augsburg Confession. Farther back in church history, in the Donatist controversy, Augustine made the distinction between the church's concern for love or unity and its concern for truth. Lutheranism was conceived and came to term under conditions that made truth the first priority; indeed, Lutheranism could justify itself on no other grounds than that it was the *true* form of Christianity, and, as Wilken reminds us, it was the truth of one theological idea, *justification*. This truth distinguished Lutherans from other ecclesiastical communities in the sixteenth century societal matrix in which they lived. The priority of truth is canonized in that central hallmark of our church, once again, the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, in which the German version is translated as follows:[15]

> It is also taught among us that the one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments administered according to the gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.

This is the famous *satis est*, "it is sufficient; it is enough." All the rest, all the diversity, is adiaphoron, that is, it need not divide the church. The value of diversity is not mentioned, nor is the character of community discussed. It is simply said that the church is defined by its adherence to the truth. Two recent celebrated biographies of Martin Luther, by Heiko Oberman[16] and James Kittelson,[17] depict this concern for truth over community in the personality and policy of the man Luther himself. There is something very Lutheran about withholding community involvement with persons who do not exhibit a prior adherence to the truth as we interpret it.

It is also very Lutheran to judge diversity in terms of whether it furthers or disrupts good order in the church, and also whether the forms from one setting are imposed oppressively on the consciences of other Christians for whom the forms are not life-giving. This stance toward diversity is reflected in Articles XIV, XV, and XVI of the Augsburg Confession, where they serve to expand on the items that fall outside the "it is enough" of Article VII, the adiaphora.

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[15] Tappert, 32. There are differences of nuance between the German and Latin versions of this article that are not insignificant for my discussion. The Latin term, *doctrina evangelii*, corresponds to the German phrase that is translated above as "the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it." The history of the different ways in which this has been understood by various Lutheran churches and theologians in the centuries since the Augsburg Confession was proclaimed is quite pertinent to the issue of how truth and community are to be related within the purview of article VII. These issues are too technical for discussion in the brief space of these lectures.

[16] Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

[17] James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).

Please note that these comments are description of historical fact before they are value judgments. It is essential that we recognize their accuracy as description.

4. The ambiguous impact of Article Seven and justification by grace. I said earlier that even though it is clear that Lutherans prize community, as do all Christians, if we wish to ground community today in the Lutheran theological tradition, we will discover that it is ambiguous in its stance toward community. The ambiguity resides in the very confessional center that marks Lutheran identity, Article VII of the Augsburg Confession and its emphasis on justification. This ambiguity amounts to a double-edged sword for us today, and it deserves our attention.

The primary support that the reformers and the first generations of Lutherans invoked for their existence as a church was precisely the claim that their communities were rooted in the truth—the truth of Scripture, the truth of the Word of God, the truth of the gospel. This possession of the truth justified them over against the Roman church that was the only recognized church in the Holy Roman Empire of their day, and it also justified their actions toward other churches that they dealt with after 1530—the Anabaptists, the Reformed, and others.

In the face of the dominant Roman church, Article Seven and the justification doctrine were a force in behalf of diversity. They were a crowbar that cracked open the hegemony of the medieval church and its laws. Articles XIV, XV, XVI, and XXI of the Augsburg Confession, as well as the articles on abuses, XXII-XXVIII, are all aimed at opening space for the diversities that were oppressed by the conventional practices and pieties of the medieval church —at least in the eyes of the Lutherans. These diversities included innovations in the Mass, non-Monastic spirituality, respect for the laity and their practice of Christian faith, and a loosening of church government. There is no doubt about the viability and even the value of our Lutheran progenitors adhering to the "truth before community" axiom. The converse would have made no sense as a sixteenth-century program for the Reformers. Both they and their princely supporters recognized that the communities of their localities were threatened with suppression because the truth of alien communities, those of the Empire, particularly in its southern European regions, was being imposed in northern locales where it did not fit the changing social and economic conditions.

When Lutherans faced churchly groups other than the Roman church, however, Article Seven and the justification doctrine did not serve diversity, but actually sanctioned Lutheran refusal to recognize church communities that did not conform to their understandings of the faith. The colloquy at Marburg in 1529 is an example of this.[18] Bucer, Oecolampadius, Zwingli, and other evangelical theologians who disagreed with Luther on various points gathered to discuss matters with Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues. They found the Lutheran essentials used against them to accuse them of heresy and withhold fellowship. Even though a concord was finally reached, its qualifications have to this day inhibited Lutherans from acknowledging the Reformed churches. In this century, European Lutherans and others have redressed the disagreements of Marburg, but the ELCA has just begun to do so.

Even in more recent times, the Lutheran essentials as expressed in Article VII and the justification doctrine have a checkered history in dealing with diversity. Where we

[18] Kittelson, 222-7; Oberman, 244.

have inherited local and larger communities, as in the so-called State Churches, we have exercised the criterion of the *satis est* very flexibly. Individual Christians and individual congregations have scarcely felt its force. However, where we have followed the form of the so-called "gathered community," as in the United States, we have consistently held to the rhetoric of truth over love or community, and we have defined and permitted community beyond the local parish very rigorously by the canon of truth that is enshrined in Article VII. We are presently, for example, quite confused about our ecumenical relationships. We have a splendid theological statement on ecumenism, but it is inseparably conjoined with a complex and difficult definition of church fellowship. We are still not certain whether a quarter century of ecumenical dialogue leading to fellowship with Reformed and Episcopal churches can conform to our theological statement and its definition of church fellowship. The issues stemming from the sixteenth century are very much at work in our thinking, even if they are present in a confused manner. On the one hand, we have difficulty interpreting for ourselves how ordination practice, which is adiaphoron to us, can be installed as a requirement for fellowship. On the other hand, we have questioned fellowship with two Reformed churches largely because the Marburg issues defining the Eucharist still linger in our minds, and we are reluctant to join with a third Reformed church, because their ecclesiology—also adiaphoron in the sixteenth century setting—is not amenable to our understanding of what church fellowship requires. Even though the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved fellowship with the Reformed churches, the struggle for fuller community with them has scarcely begun. Church political factors are every bit as forceful for us in these relationships as they were for the colloquists at Marburg, even if they are played out on a smaller scale. As liberating as Article VII ought to be, and as freeing as we assert the justification doctrine to be, neither has been successful in clearing our vision on things ecumenical.

5. The context for Lutheran truth and community today. The concern for truth in community life is not outmoded today. Certainly, our life today is marked by the attempt to build community among the various peoples of the world and of our own nation on ideologies that are inadequate and even false. The ideologies of hedonistic pleasure, of ethnic imperialism and racism, of gender dominance, of economic interest are to the fore today as proposals for building community.

Truth is not secondary to our community life today, but our context demands that we approach these issues quite differently from earlier generations of Lutherans, including the sixteenth century generations. Community beyond the parameters that Lutherans have traditionally envisioned is a higher priority than truth defined in the doctrinal terms that have so often prevailed in Lutheran history. Community beyond the narrowest loyalties of the human race is what is in question in our day, such community is what is in danger of collapsing or, even more, of never even coming into being. Consequently, to focus on truth as if it were the *precondition* of community can be demonic and death-dealing.

I have spoken of the deep thrust toward community today as "belonging without conditions." This phrase speaks to several of the factors that are determinative for community today. I spoke earlier of the factors of technology, diversity within a drive for unity, pluralism, and economic-social structures as shaping community to-

day. Earlier epochs of our Lutheran history offered two possibilities for building community: either (1) solid societal structures on which the Lutheran churches could build—as in Luther's own time or in the settlement of Westphalia or in the ethnic structures of Africa and parts of Asia, or (2) the possibility of cultural homogeneity, from which our churches drew during most of their history in North America. In our time, however, the task of community-formation is different—that of bringing into being communities that are viable in a technologized world (as I described it above), that cross the boundaries of pluralism, and that actualize belonging in the context of competing economic and social class interests.

Structures for such community do not exist in any society in the world in any significant fashion. Since the society of the United States is itself struggling to fashion such structures, there are none here for the ELCA or any other church to build upon. And since communities of cultural homogeneity are precisely the sort of inadequate communities that do not respond to the larger human need for belonging, such homogeneity cannot be more than a transitional option for the ELCA.

6. The inadequacy of culturally homogeneous community. This latter point must be recognized clearly and reflected upon—and discussed widely. The ELCA may be tempted to follow a strategy of fostering culturally homogeneous sub-communities, but that will work only in certain places, and such communities cannot be the model or normative image for the ELCA as one national church. Since the route of cultural homogeneity is so widely encouraged and, on the surface, so successful, the ELCA must be all the more clear about the inadequacies of this strategy. The human cry today for community that issues so poignantly from the soul of humankind on this planet and in our United States society places belonging beyond cultural homogeneity at the highest priority—belonging without conditions. Homogeneous communities cannot proclaim and practice belonging without conditions. Such communities always define belonging in terms of "being like us." Furthermore, "being like us" functions as the criterion of truth that is actually placed above community as such with all of God's creatures.

Homogeneous communities cannot proclaim and practice belonging without conditions.

It is precisely that criterion of "being like us" that is rendered problematic in the landscape of our search for community today, particularly in the United States. Whether the concept of "being like us" is filled with the content of race, ethnicity, gender, economic and social class, or some other factor of homogeneity, it bids fair both to nourish the human spirit and body, and also to destroy them. On the one hand, the community of "those like us" is the most natural, the closest to the ground of our survival. On the other hand, the multicultural cry is a deep plea that the truth of one culture not be allowed to serve as the blade that cuts off community for those who lie outside that truth. The cry that crosses economic and social class is the plea that the truth of affluence and bourgeois civility not

If belonging depends on our proper understanding and preaching of the gospel, then none of us can belong.

be tolerated as the knife that cuts the bond of belonging with the working class and the poor, for example.

Cultural homogeneity is genuinely demonic, as Paul Tillich understood that concept. The demonic is something good that turns against itself and becomes evil. Cultural homogeneity is a blessing; it is a gift that has been bestowed on us from the past, and it enables a great deal that is good. The Teilhardian model I described earlier explains why such homogeneity is fundamental. *If the homogeneity is made into a criterion of belonging*, however—whether theoretical or functional or both—that conditions the dynamic for unity, it becomes anti-human and anti-life. If homogeneity as one legitimate phase of the rhythm that Teilhard describes, displaces or defines the movement of that rhythm toward larger unity, then it exacerbates the hurt that the human race seeks to heal today.

This demonic quality must be understood as fully as possible. For many persons in our society, culturally homogeneous community is a survival reality, it is life-giving. Within the church, however, and also within the larger society, this homogeneity must be considered to be only a provisional survival mechanism—only one phase of the rhythm of human development on our planet. Belonging without conditions represents this complementary phase of greater unity. This is the phase that we presently are resisting; we find it nearly impossible to negotiate the passage that it sets before us. All homogeneous communities within the church must recognize this. The human community, including the church, cannot avoid this passage. It is integral to God's creation as it has emerged in our time. The future of our possibilities will be thwarted to the extent that we resist community beyond cultural homogeneity. Theologically, this is the import of pluralism and multiculturality—they dare not be consigned to the categories of political correctness, secular humanism, or even social justice—even though these last two categories are by no means to be despised.

The community of cultural homogeneity is a product of human evolution; it has been a survival strategy for most of human history. It is the soil in which ethnic cleansing of all sorts has grown. Today it is clear that God is calling us beyond that, to undertake fundamental shifts in how human culture and community are carried out. The church as community stands directly at the center of God's calling. The question today is whether that center will hold, or whether the patterns of constructing community on the principle of "those like us," which is as old as the Stone Age, will persist. Nowhere is the cutting edge of possibility and transformation more palpable than in this domain of human existence today.

Belonging without conditions does not demean our particularities and our communities of homogeneity—indeed, it is in those communities that we have accessed life and God's good gifts. Belonging without conditions points us rather to the truth that our communities of homogeneity cannot define the length and breadth of our humanity and of our human belonging.

7. Lutheran essentials as resource for belonging today without conditions. It does not come easily for Lutherans to hear that their church is called to become a community of belonging without conditions. This calling means that the nurturing of such community is in itself a good. It needs no further justification. I suggest that despite their ambivalent career over four and one-half centuries, the Lutheran essentials that I have invoked—Article VII of the Augsburg Confession and the doctrine of justification—can be a powerful resource for the ELCA as it responds to God's calling of community without conditions. We must not gloss over the ambivalent historical impact of our cherished essential truths; indeed, we cannot actualize God's new future for us unless we acknowledge and deeply understand the ambivalent path that Lutheran truth has traversed. We must resist the very Lutheran tendency to insist that the core of our theological truth has always been life-giving, just as we must resist arguing once again that purer understanding would have given us a cleaner track record.

There is another way to look at this matter, however. I suggest that belonging without conditions is the form that truth takes in our time, that this is the form of the pure gospel that is to be preached and taught among us today. Indeed, the church will want to demonstrate that the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ is what enables and nurtures the deep community that humanity seeks today. It is Christ in his pure and efficacious presence through the Holy Spirit that brings such community into existence and enables it to live wholesomely, in a life-giving manner.

In other words, one could say that the import of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession for us today is that the gospel in its purity breaks all of our correct understandings of the gospel and all of our attempts to make our understandings into criteria for community. We should know that today. After all, we truly violate the seventh article every day, since we set our own understanding of the gospel as norm when we know very well that nowhere in our church or in any other is the gospel preached and taught as purely as that confessional article might imply. Article Seven is clearly a testimony to the fact that Reformation Lutherans—and even more, the next following generations—were speaking of an academic theological propositional form of gospel formulation. Such formulations as norms may have been required for the church's negotiations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but they are genuinely *un*useful as norms of community formation in our time.

8. Justification and belonging without conditions. Today, justification cannot be simply an academic formulated proposition. Today, community as belonging without conditions is a vital expression of the lived-out reality of our central idea of justification by grace. Belonging without conditions means that not only does God enable belonging across all sorts of boundaries, but, just as significantly, belonging in spite of our being wrong in our understanding of the gospel. If belonging depends on our proper understanding and preaching of the gospel, then none of us can belong. The community that the church is called to become today is a living embodiment of the truth that all human differences and all human criteria for belonging are humbled before the Creator and Redeemer God. All are relativized by God who desires more that we belong to God's own self than that we be correct in our understandings. Such an understanding *is* pure doctrine for our day, it *is* the correct understanding of the gospel that Article

Seven calls for.

Such an interpretation of the Lutheran essentials does not disdain correct understanding. This essay itself testifies to my belief in the importance of correct understanding! However, we must recognize as correct the truth that we are justified in spite of our doctrinal inadequacies and because of them. Justification entails such an understanding and consequently it can be the theological foundations of such a community—a community which embodies the reality of justifying grace by the insistence that the only condition for Christian community is that one come and begin the pilgrimage. Chickenpops has it right, the Shepherd of the church does not exact correct theological belief so much as he enables all of us faulty theologians to be part of the community of belonging without conditions. Justification in our time opens our eyes and our minds to the truth that there can be no humanity without a community of belonging and that there can be no truth without such community.

Community of belonging and possibility

The theme of these lectures, stated at the outset, is the church as community of God's possibilities and the process of God's transforming us into those possibilities. The community of belonging without conditions is about transformation and possibilities. The cry for such community is fundamental to the shape of our present, and therefore fundamental for the passage into the future that God's transforming work sets before us. For us as church in the United States, as ELCA, there is no actualizing God's possibilities apart from community nor apart from community as belonging without conditions.

This is not just inclusiveness, not only justice, not finally a matter of quotas and politically correct language. The community of belonging is called to more. The "more" God has in mind is that the condition of human existence today be not a barrier to belonging to God and to all God's human brothers and sisters, and to all the rest of God's creatures.

We dare not set conditions that might bar the community of Christ's church to any of God's creatures. I close this section with a word from the novelist James Baldwin. In his book, *The Fire Next Time*, he argues that all children must be taught that "the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion." He goes on to write:[19]

> I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.

I have spoken, not of impossibility, but of possibility within the will and work of our God in Jesus Christ, for the creation. Baldwin and I are not talking about different things. God's possibilities do appear to us as impossibilities, but, as Baldwin observes, God regularly empowers the impossible. For God, it is not the impossible, but what God has set as our possibilities. The community of belonging without conditions is the human impossibility in which God's possibilities for humans can be actualized. Let us pray for that and also work for it.

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[19] Cited in West, ix.

The Demographics of Possibility: People's Church

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Introduction: the story of two people's churches

In recent years, I have spent Christmas week in a small but growing and economically dynamic farming community in one of our western plains states. Germans formed the larger portion of the early citizens of this town, with nearly an equal number of Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Today the one Catholic church is flourishing, as is the ELCA church. I want to describe my experience in these churches, and you must understand that none of my comments are intended as value-judgments, but rather the most accurate descriptions that I can muster.

The worship in neither the Roman Catholic nor the ELCA church would be recognized by the original worshippers in those communities—at least that is my guess. In both its exterior lines and its interior ornamentation, St. Theresa's looks much as it has for the past five or six decades, but as the worshippers entered the vestibule this past Christmas Eve, they read notices of local Head Start programs in Spanish, and, depending on which Mass they attended, they heard it in neither its original Latin, nor in post-Vatican II English, but in Spanish, with guitar folk music accompaniment. This Mass is definitely for the migrant Latino workers and their families who have filled up lower paying jobs at the regional meat packing plant. Even if this were an English Mass, the music had little resemblance to that which the original Germans brought with them a century or more ago. Guitars, American folk songs, and Latino folk songs set the tone of the Mass. The Latinos were encouraged to attend, with their families, infants included, by the middle-aged Spanish-speaking nuns attached to the parish.

Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church worships in its 75-year-old building, but the visual appearance is dramatically changed from what the earlier worshippers were accustomed to, by a contemporary sleek addition that contrasts with the older structure. Inside, the chancel's original German village Gothic ornate altar, with old-fashioned pictures of Jesus, has given way to the contemporary pleasant tastefulness that

corresponds to a fine suburban sanctuary. The original altar piece is located in a historical niche that has been installed in a new section of the building, whereas the Star of Bethlehem round stained-glass window that was originally over the altar is now hanging on the sanctuary wall, illuminated by back lighting. The services, even at Holy Communion, do not follow the official liturgy books, but are put together from an evangelical worship order that has strong southern California influences, including hymns that ring with the flavor of Christian pop music, with its overtones of Hollywood show tunes. The lessons are read either in King James or evangelical translations, with no sign of gender-inclusive language. There is a variety of music—choral, vocal and instrumental solos, and congregational singing. A portion of the Christmas Eve Communion service is a candlelight meditation on Jesus as the Light of the World. This informal meditation ritual is much more impressive than the traditional Eucharistic ritual. At least 20 different laypersons participate in some way in leading the service.

The worship at both St. Theresa's and Our Redeemer's is impressive, relevant, well attended, the kind that sends the worshippers home with a strong sense that they have attended something meaningful, the kind of service that they will remember, appealing to adults and children alike.

Musically, the defining characteristics of the two worship services reminds one of Latino folk songs on the one hand, and Kathie Lee Gifford's popular Christian ballads on the other. That contrast, in each case so different from the long-time history of the two parishes, also suggests that each of these communities is making the transition from the cultures of the original worshippers to those of the people who constitute the community today. The differences between the two churches follow the lines of difference between the emerging Anglo-Latino culture in the one parish and the indigenous, established middle-class white culture of the other. Both are dynamic and flourishing, both are significantly different from their founding historical traditions, and both are becoming the People's Church for their present generation of parishioners. Whether the founding generations would recognize themselves in either church, or would approve of what exists today, is an open question. The response of traditionalists, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran, to the vigorous worship that marks these two churches today would probably be skepticism, at best.

It is very likely that the earlier generations of parishioners felt the same loyal attachments to the churches as the present generation, that the worship reflected their expectations and experience just as clearly. These two churches began as People's Church and continue in that trajectory. Remaining close to their people, however, has brought dramatic changes to both.

The force of the people's culture

One thing impressed me deeply as I reflected on St. Theresa's and Our Redeemer's churches: There has been a strong continuity of intention and structure at the two churches, but their embodiments have had to take forms that are not only accessible to the people in their communities, they have also had to be forms in which the people can see themselves and their own lives. These two churches have continuously intended to proclaim the gospel, worship and celebrate the sacraments, provide social ambience for the people, and care for people through the exigencies of their lives. The *forms* of proclamation, celebration, socializing, and caring have followed the forms of

the culture of the people.

Furthermore, culture has been the normative factor governing the changes and also the key to the vigor and accessibility of these churches' ministry. Culture, as I am using the term, has not diminished the centrality of Jesus Christ; it has not compromised the ministry of word and sacrament and pastoral outreach; nor has it caused Scripture to be neglected nor service in the community. Culture has, however, exerted its pressure on how Christ, ministry, outreach, Scripture, and service are articulated in the life of these churches today, and it is culture that defines most dramatically the differences between the churches.

As culture has exerted its pressure, the people have exercised the criterion of accessibility over considerations of traditional preference and correctness. Spanish as a medium of worship and instruction and Latino folk songs are unintelligible to the preceding traditions of this Roman Catholic community, just as hymns in popular musical idiom and the dismantling of the traditional chancel and its windows are totally new to the Lutheran community. Judged by the gospel and theological soundness, these changes cannot be faulted. Criticism of the changes most likely will be grounded in cultural tastes that are not at home in the communities of the people who worship at St. Theresa's and Our Redeemer's. These alien standards of taste will find Spanish strange, will prefer village Gothic to middle-class ideas of pleasantness, and will be put off by hymns that praise Christ in the musical idiom of show tunes.

1. Sacred space where salvation happens

Is this emphasis on people's culture simply an accommodation? Is it an abandonment of high standards in favor of pandering to immediate popular demands? That may well be a part of it, and a part that must be monitored carefully. But accommodation and pandering are not the central issue. The core reality at stake here is that the people's culture expresses the coherence, the purpose, the project of the people, and these are the vessels which carry the fulfillment of the possibilities of the people. The coherence of the people in the community, the purpose of the people, the project which these people embody—these are the medium in which the people receive God's possibility, the medium in which their transformation occurs and is fulfilled. Neither village gothic nor the music of the classic Lutheran composers is where these people, in the profoundest sense, live out their lives. Consequently, gothic and chorales cannot be the vessel of their possibilities and their transformation.

Throughout this lecture, when I refer to "people" and "people's church," I refer to that churchly community which carries the material and spiritual coherence and project of its people and interprets them in terms of the recognizable Christian symbols. The term "people's church" speaks of the relationship of the church to the coherence and the project of the people who make up its community. To affirm the concept of people's church is to insist that there ought to be a recognizable relationship between the church and the cultural vessels that carry the people's possibilities and fulfillment. To ask what makes for a people's church is to explore the nature of this relationship and what it requires. To criticize the church for not being the people's church is to lay bare its failure to relate to those things that make for the people's possibilities, transformation, and fulfillment. In the terms of this Hein-Fry lecture theme, "people's church" points to the sacred space where a people's salvation happens.



I shall be speaking at length in this lecture about people's culture and people's church, because I am convinced that these terms point to a significant vessel that carries God's work of transformation for the ELCA now and in the next generation. If we want to perceive and comprehend what God is doing in and with the ELCA in our times, we must also understand the people's church.

Our faith is unambiguous in its understanding that Christ's redemption is intended for the creation as it actually exists, for human beings in their actual earthly lives. As the Epistle to the Hebrews asserts (2:16-17), "it is clear that Jesus did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect." This view of Jesus complements what we find in the first chapter of Colossians: "In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, all things have been created through him and for him." The point I want to draw from these and other similar testimonies from our tradition is that God's creation work is the ground of what we are as human beings, as well as of our transformation through the actualizing of our God-given possibilities. God's work of redeeming and sanctifying is directed toward the substance of what God has created. Further, both the work of creation and the work of redemption are in Christ, that is, the divine motivation that lies behind them, the shape and the purposes that govern them—all of this brought into being and energized by the reality that has been disclosed in Jesus Christ.

The substance of the affirmation that creation, redemption, and sanctification are the work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit gives meaning to the concepts of the "people" and the "people of God." A people, considered as individuals and also as a body in which the individuals find their life, is constituted by what God has given them in their creation and redemption. The terms I used above—the coherence, the purpose, the project of the people—are the principal gifts that God has given to the people. It is these gifts that God intends to redeem, it is these gifts that are the locus of the possibilities that God has given and the possibilities that God is transforming into the fulfillment that God has in store for the creation. It is not some angelic identity, not some abstract other-worldly or after-worldly possibilities that God has bestowed and will transform, but the this-worldly life that exists right and here and now in the people.

If the church truly is a witness and embodiment of what God the Holy Spirit is doing in the world, as interpreted in and through Jesus Christ, then it will be related to God's gifts to the people and God's work of transforming the possibilities for which those gifts are the vessels.

These considerations point to my working definition of the term "people's church": *The church life that is intimately bound up in the actual realities of the lived-out lives of its people and the cultural expressions of these realities.*

Some scholarly insights into people's church

"People's religion" and its import for the church is much discussed in some circles, particularly among those concerned with the church's mission, as well as sociologists and anthropologists. The most common way they talk about this subject is with the term "popular religion." In this case, "popular" refers to the "people," in line with the basic etymology of the term, as in the term *vox pop*, the media's shortening of *vox populi*, the voice of the people. Some of the scholarly insights are helpful to us in the context of our theme.[20]

Where faith is made one's own. I begin with Alex Garcia-Rivera's reflection on these matters.[21] In his reflection on Paul Tillich's interpretation of religious faith as directed toward "ultimate concern," Garcia-Rivera suggests rephrasing Tillich in this way: "Faith is the *personal appropriation by an individual of a 'Big Story.'*" He then goes on to define popular religion in these terms: "*Popular religion is a site, or a series of sites, in which faith is challenged, interpreted, and made one's own.*"[22] Garcia-Rivera relates these definitions directly to the church:

> ...making faith one's own may be seen as a goal of the Church or as a challenge to her. Perhaps it is here where most suspicion of popular religion occurs, for in making faith one's own, there is a danger that such a faith may not correspond with that of the official institution. Indeed, this does happen. On the other hand, without making faith one's own, there can be no authentic participation in the "Big Story" of the official institution. This, I believe, is the significance of popular religion for the Church. Popular religion is a way in which the faith of its members becomes authenticated. Popular religion is a crucible in which the faith of the Church becomes incarnated. It is a place where the "Big Story" carried by official tradition is made possible through the "little" stories of the popular.

Wholistic, many-layered, a way of life. Sometimes popular religion is termed "folk religion" or "common religion" or "civil religion." Each of these terms throws some light on what we are talking about, and each also limits our understanding somewhat. The term "popular religion" often is applied to the poor when Latin America is the field of study, because they are the majority class there. In North American studies, it generally focuses on the middle class, since it is the majority class on our continent. It need not be restricted to either the poor or the middle class, however. "Folk religion" has

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[20] My colleague José D. Rodríguez has been very helpful in shaping my understanding of people's religion and people's church. See his "On Doing Hispanic Theology," a lecture presented in 1995 at the A.E.T.H.'s first Encuentro on Theology and Ethics at Princeton Seminary. This lecture owes a great deal to his constructive critical comments. See also his essays: "Confessing Our Faith in Spanish: Challenge or Promise," in Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Fernando Segovia, eds., *Hispanic Theology: Challenge and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) and "Hispanic Theology's Foundational Challenges," in Daniel R. Rodriguez-Diaz and David Cortes-Fuentes, eds., *Hidden Stories: Unveiling the History of the Latino Church* (Decatur, Georgia: A.E.T.H., 1994), 125-9.

[21] Garcia-Rivera was for some years pastor of an ELCA congregation in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He received both his M.Div. and his doctorate from LSTC, and now, having become Roman Catholic, teaches at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley. His doctoral dissertation has been published as *St. Martin de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

[22] Garcia-Rivera, 19-21.

been a romanticized category, often referring to the indigenous population of an area, together with their traditions of tales, proverbs, and lore. The term often is used to speak of pre-industrialized conditions of culture. "Common religion" is a sociological concept that distinguishes the masses of the population from the leadership elite, and which also takes into account the function of religion to meet the needs of a population and its relation to the other cultural forms through which people satisfy their needs.[23]

I prefer the term "popular religion," recognizing that it is complex and many-layered; it is also wholistic, since it cuts through all of the dimensions of lived-out life. Religion is not just a set of ideas, it also involves life at the levels of psychology, society, politics, economics, personal intimacy and recreation. It is more a way of life than a view of life, although the two are closely interrelated. Orlando Espin conceives of Latino popular religion as being comprised of beliefs, ethical expectations, rituals, and a broad range of experiences that can be characterized as meaningful.[24] Even though the concept of popular religion can be applied to just a segment of society, such as a particular social class, ethnic group, or occupational sector, it also can help us to understand larger groupings.

I use the term "people's church" to express how popular religion is significant for and present in the ELCA.

A challenge to the church. Precisely because it is wholistic and lived out, popular religion is a challenge to the church; it is not easy for the church to embody "people's church." Popular religion is often viewed with suspicion by the *official* church and its leaders. People who identify with the official church are often confused and angry when worship, theology, stewardship, social outreach or the like does not follow the official guidelines and practices. They look at popular religion as something that needs to be brought into line. The official church often criticizes people's religion from a right-wing perspective, concerned that alien elements may dilute the official point of view.

Elitist dimensions of the church often scorn people's religion because it seems crude, simplistic, and at odds with the reformist interests of the elite. The elite most often is an intellectual community that looks upon the people's religion as something that needs to be enlightened or even eradicated.[25] This constitutes a kind of left-wing critique.

Elites are also in the church as the trained persons who have special education and knowledge that is not shared with the whole community, but which is the source of the generalized information that is shared with all. Trained directors of music and liturgy do not inform the congregation (or even the choir) of all the musicological and liturgiological lore that they can command. Similarly, pastors do not share in their sermons all of the exegetical knowledge they have gained in seminary, nor do they share with the parishioners all of the counseling psychological knowledge and techniques that they have learned. The church entrusts such special knowledge to elites, with the expectation that they will transmit less spe-

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[23] Robert Schreiter has given extensive attention to these interpretations of popular religion in his classic work, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), especially 124-27.

[24] Orlando Espin, "Popular Religion as an Epistemology (of Suffering)," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 2 (November 1994):69.

[25] See the discussions by Schreiter, 131-39, and Espino, 61-67, 77-78.

cialized wisdom to the rank and file, in harmony with their special knowledge. By necessity, the people as such appear uneducated, and their leadership always has to be supplemented by the wisdom that only the elite possesses. The church places a high premium on the elite of any generation passing on its wisdom to the next generation of elite, with the result that the elite is specially educated from generation to generation and the people are always more or less ignorant from generation to generation and thus in need of the expertise that only the elite can provide. This sense of elite is an important segment of the official church.

Justo Gonzalez. This historian of theology has suggested a typology of Christian theology that is relevant to our discussion of people's church. Like all typologies, it is suggestive rather than historically demonstrable. Gonzalez speaks of three types of theology, existing from the second century onwards in the church: type A, whose interest is moral, whose main categories are those of the law, and who was represented early on by Tertullian; type B, whose interest is metaphysical, whose main categories are those of truth, and whose representative was Origen; type C, whose interest is pastoral, whose main categories are those of the current historical context, looking for God's work of hope, and whose representative was Irenaeus.[26]

Type C theology includes the work of Martin Luther, in this analysis, and it proceeds from the assumption that God has purposes for our lives and for human history as a whole, and this theological approach seeks to help Christians glimpse those purposes and participate in them.[27] Such a theological perspective is closely tied to the actual situations in which Christians live out their lives and its goal is to be pastorally effective in those situations, assisting Christians to discern God's work and will in our history. Such a theological effort would obviously be most commensurate with what I am calling *people's church.*

2. "Big Stories" and the "little stories" of our lives

Earlier on, I spoke of "little stories" and "Big Stories."[28] These terms do require some explanation. The ideas that they convey are basically simple, but we must be clear about how they interrelate.

The Big Story. The "Big Story" is the reality which every person and every group struggles to discern, because it is the Story that comprehends the largest dimensions of the meaning of their lives. The Big Story is the story that speaks to every person and group and thereby gives them confidence that their own personal "little stories" are not just their own subjective fabrications, because their little stories find resonance in other persons' stories. In conversation with other little stories, unless each of those stories is to be considered a fanciful construction, the story-tellers discover that they are part of a larger narrative. In technical terminology, we would say that the Big Story carries the social validation of the little stories. Obviously, the way I am using these terms does rest in the confidence that our stories can be *true* in the sense that they refer to something, but awareness of this referentiality emerges only in the interaction, the conversation, between stories. This interaction demonstrates that each little story is part of, or interwoven with, a reality that

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[26] Justo Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 32-33.

[27] Gonzalez, 77-90, 141-58.

[28] Garcia-Rivera, 1-2, 20-21.

both transcends the little stories and yet confirms them and provides the context for their interaction. The social and cosmic world of a Big Story expresses this reality.[29]

In terms of our Christian faith, the Big Story is the church's official rendering of the gospel, the normative presentation of the Christian faith. The Big Story is thus synonymous with what we call the Word of God, the Gospel, and the Christian Faith, and these terms all embody our interpretation of the basic message of the Bible and the Christian tradition. The content of this Big Story is presented in our creeds, in our liturgy and sacraments, our confessions, our Lutheran Confessions, and also in our vows—at baptism, confirmation, affirmation of baptism, ordination, installation, and in the additional vows that seminary professors and bishops take. The Big Story is told by preachers and Sunday School teachers, bishops and pastors, by seminary professors and other academic scholars in theology—but it is not to be confused or identified with the authentic "little stories" that teachers, preachers, pastors, bishops, and professors also tell. Sometimes it is technical and learned, as in the Formula of Concord and in the Confession of Faith in our Constitution. It often requires academic expertise in interpreting, as in the case of ecumenical negotiation with other churches. The Big Story is the fundamental narrative of the Christian faith that governs the identity of our church as church and also aims to provide the largest interpretation of every Christian's life.

The "little stories." The term "little stories" refers to the stories by which individuals and particular communities render their own concrete experience, the stories in which the coherence and the project of communities are given expression. These stories tell the history of the particular communities and thereby present its identity, as I described the dialectic of identity, earlier, in which identity is what our past has borne, up to the present moment. Apart from these little stories, there is no presentation of particular identity.

How do Big and little stories interact in the church? Although the Big Story of our Christian faith is often referred to, and is presupposed by nearly everyone, it is not so clear exactly what it includes or how it is to be told. The history of Christian diversity and controversy can be interpreted as a struggle to define the Big Christian Story, and the struggle to define the Story is a struggle to be included in it. The Big Story establishes the standard by which "Christian" is defined, and consequently it is an instrument for determining both unity and differentiation.[30] It is the little stories that comprise the Big Story, as in Garcia-Rivera's image of the small tiles that make up the mosaic, and it is these little stories that vie for inclusion within the Big Story. Precisely because the Big Story does define what is Christian and thus determines both unity and differentiation, inclusion within its mosaic is a survival issue for all particular Christian communities, and also an issue

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[29] I rely on conversations with Alex Garcia-Rivera for referring me to E. Benveniste, *Problemes de Linguistique Generale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), who interprets conversation between persons as discourse between an I and a You who are distinct entities, neither of which can be solely the fabrication of the other, and the conversation takes place in a world, else there is no conversation. If the interaction of stories is real and not itself a fabrication, then the interaction similarly takes place in a world, which is the subject of the Big Story.

[30] See the discussion by Daniel R. Rodriguez-Diaz, "Hidden Stories," in Rodriguez-Diaz and Cortes-Fuentes, 1-3.

of power and domination. One thinks of "Do the Right Thing," Spike Lee's movie of some years ago, in which the African Americans rioted against a white pizza parlor owner because they wanted the portraits of their heroes included on the wall where the owner had hung the faces of his favorite sports heroes—all white. That wall of portraits could be the Big Story, and as such it defined what a hero was, and it determined not only the pantheon of heroes but also who was left out of the pantheon.

Except for the barest abstractions, there is not universal agreement on what constitutes the Big Christian Story. Furthermore, the agreed-upon content and structure of the Story is constantly fluctuating. One celebrated example of this process is reported in Paul's confrontation with Peter over the issue of circumcision. As long the Big Christian Story was restricted to the Jewish story, Gentiles could not qualify as being Christian in terms of their own identity, since they had to assume a Jewish identity first.

Historic Lutheran struggles. Another example strikes close to home. The community of the Lutheran reformers established the story of forensic justification—justification by God's grace alone appropriated through faith alone—as its own little story. This little story might be considered to be the story of the Lutheran community vis-a-vis the medieval church; or it might also be the story of the German and Nordic peoples vis-a-vis the rest of the Holy Roman Empire, particularly as the Empire took shape in the western half of the Mediterranean basin and among the cultures of the Romance languages. Lutherans argued vigorously that their story was part of the Big Story, identifying it with the biblical revelation—in fact, this is the reasoning behind our insistence that Scripture be interpreted

Except for the barest abstractions, there is not universal agreement on what constitutes the Big Christian Story.

through the "canon within the canon," so that justification becomes synonymous with the biblical message.

The Roman church refused to acknowledge that the Lutheran story was the Big Catholic Story or even that it could be included within the Big Catholic Story. Through the subsequent generations, the Roman Catholic Church has continued to withhold such acknowledgment. In 1980, in a gesture of reconciliation, the Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles spoke publicly, as some other Catholic theologians have, to the effect that the Lutheran story is indeed fully and genuinely Christian. But, he said, forensic justification cannot be made the sole official rendering of the Catholic faith, it must co-exist alongside other versions. It is, in other words, a genuine Catholic rendering for those who can live within it—for Lutherans, in other words—and it can be recognized as such by Catholics. But it cannot stand as normative for all. Dulles in fact provided a remarkable insight. He was saying, in effect, that the Lutheran understanding of justification could be acknowledged as a legitimate and genuine little Christian story, but that it could never be granted the status of Big Christian Story. Presumably, Lutherans could take their place as a kind of religious order within the larger

church, just as Jesuits, Benedictines, Irish Catholics, Polish Catholics, Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholics, and others do.

On the Lutheran side, we are continually insisting that forensic justification be placed at the center of the Christian Story. Several of the early readers of the manuscript of this lecture commented very precisely, "You must include more talk about justification and the Lutheran essentials." They were in effect saying that if Lutheran audiences are to receive what I say, I must relate it explicitly and fundamentally to what is recognized as the Big Christian Story by most ELCA Lutherans. In other words, it must be a clear rendition of the Big Lutheran Story. Many of us would also want to claim that the Lutheran story qualifies as a basic motif of the Catholic story—even though most Catholics find the doctrinal form of our story strange to their ears.

Little stories within the ELCA today. In the 1986 "Harare Message of Black Lutherans," we read a "Black Critique of the Lutheran Heritage" that was written by a group of African and African American Lutheran theologians, including a number of persons who are members of the ELCA.[31] This critique focuses on four items of the Lutheran tradition as it has been interpreted by European-American Lutherans: (1) justification separated from sanctification; (2) the two kingdoms doctrine interpreted quietistically; (3) the doctrine of the ministry interpreted so as to encourage clericalism; and (4) an interpretation of Lutheranism that does not encourage diversity. In their insistence that James' "Faith without works is dead" must be joined with Paul's "The righteous shall live by faith," as well as in their argument that the two kingdoms doctrine must sustain activism against slavery and oppression, these Black Lutherans are in fact urging that their own little story be accepted either as the Big Lutheran Story or as an integral part of it.

When they confront ELCA Lutherans to acknowledge the fundamental oneness of justification and sanctification, the Black theologians offer a challenge that is symmetrical with that which the sixteenth century reformers offered to the Catholic Christians of that time, to acknowledge that their little story be acknowledged to have the status of the Big Story. If we understand that the Big Story tells us what Christian faith is really like, we can also understand why particular communities cannot do other than to insist that their little stories be acknowledged as standing in positive relationship to the Big Story. Comparable interpretations should be made of the feminist argument for eliminating gender-exclusive language and designations of God.

Little stories make the Big Story possible. We may now be in the position to appreciate Garcia-Rivera's assertion that little stories "are told not to replace the 'Big Story' but instead to make such a story possible."[32] If the Epistle of James is not joined to the Epistle to the Romans in an intrinsic manner, the Lutheran Big Story cannot be that Big Story for African Americans. If gender-exclusive language and concepts are identified as intrinsic to the Big Lutheran Story, then it cannot be the Big Story for women.

The Big Story tells the story about what

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[31] In Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo, eds., *Theology and the Black Experience: The Lutheran Heritage Interpreted by African and African American Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 264-70. The ELCA theologians include James Echols, Rudolph Featherstone, Will Herzfeld, Craig Lewis, Albert Pero, Cheryl Stewart Pero, Richard Perry, and Lee Wesley.

[32] Garcia-Rivera, 2.

it means to be human and what it means to trust God in the largest terms possible, universally and eternally. Little stories also tell about the meaning of our humanity, sometimes so simply that the official specialist in the Big Story overlooks or despises them.

> The simple and the profound go together. The concern, then, is not to get rid of the specialist or the art of disclosing the universal principles of human reality. *The concern, rather, is to disclose the conditions that make such an art possible in the first place.... The "little stories" promise the possibility of the return to the "Big Story," a return of meaning and relevance in our present social restlessness and lack of direction.*[33]

The little stories are mosaic tiles that emerge from the lived culture to provide glimpses of meaning. If the Epistle of James and the Epistle to the Romans are viewed together as one, then the Big Lutheran Story can function among African American Lutherans as a genuinely viable story of what Christian faith is. Similarly, if gender-exclusive language and concepts can be decoupled from the Big Lutheran Story, it can be the story of Christian faith for women and others with their sensibilities.

The point of these metaphors, little stories and Big Story, is that the Big Story of the universal meaning of God, humans, and the world can be emptied of meaning and urgency and availability, as in times like our own, unless it is in touch with the little stories of meaning that grow out of people's lived domains of existence, out of their lived-out cultures. These little stories have personal and communal meaning, and they enable people to live day-by-day. This meaningfulness gives people confidence that, if the lines of connection are rightly drawn, the Big Story can have meaning, it can enhance and enrich their little stories and the meanings of those stories. The little stories establish the reliability of stories as such, and any Big Story depends upon that reliability for its efficacy. From this interrelationship, we can see that the Big Story and the little stories need each other; they exist in a subtle and complex symbiosis.

Little stories tell about the meaning of our humanity, sometimes so simply that the official specialist in the Big Story overlooks or despises them.

The little stories can exercise a critique on the Big Story, chiefly on the grounds that the Big Story does not incorporate the content of their experience and the future of their identity. The critical traffic is two ways, however. The Big Story reminds every particular community that the world is indeed polychrome, it includes more than a single color. The Catholic Big Story has insisted that the Lutheran story acknowledge that the sanctified life of good works has itself been a medium of grace for many Christians, contrary to the experience of Luther's generation. The Catholic Big Story criticized the Donatist little story, on the grounds that as desirable as it may be for priests to be morally upright persons, God's power of actualizing grace in the sacraments will not be stymied by the sins of the

[33] Garcia-Rivera, 5.

priest. When some little stories enlist God's favor on the side of violent and ethnocentric projects, the Big Story rejects their identification of God with self-serving community aims.

The official church must be sensitive if it is to discern the little stories that are essential for the life of its Big Story, and it must be willing to undergo the self-criticism that the little stories bear with them. The tellers of authentic little stories must be willing to undergo the give-and-take of the polychrome human community, within the very large world of the God who has created all of the communities and lies behind all of their stories. This give-and-take will exercise its own critique. After the encounter of the stories, Big and little, none will remain exactly the same. To be sure, there is a certain issue of power implicit in the relationship between little stories and the Big Story. The tellers of little stories may well resist relating to any Big Story, because it threatens their power and survival, just as the keepers of the Big Story (whoever they may be) may deny that they need to relate to the little stories. Neither the keepers of the Big Story nor the tellers of the little stories have a monopoly or a right of proprietorship over their stories. This issue of power is a topic of its own that I will not dwell on here, even though it is critical to understanding the challenge of the people's church.

These metaphors of little stories and the Big Story will be significant for my interpretation of the ELCA as people's church.

3. Why is people's church important now?

There are two fundamental reasons why the people's church concept is of central and critical importance for us in the church today. These reasons grow out of the fact that people's church is located in that domain of lived-out existence in which persons and communities engage the basic meanings of their lives.

New lived experiences. First, dramatic changes have taken place in human ways of living, both as individuals and as societies, some of which I described in the preceding lecture. This means that the domain of lived-out existence has changed in significant ways, which in turn means that the domain in which basic meaning is engaged and in which faith takes place has also changed. The church's Big Stories are challenged to interface with people's everyday lives in terms of new and different little stories that reflect the new conditions of life.

A phenomenology of lived life among the people would reveal that genuinely new experience is occurring that has scarcely been incorporated into the people's little stories, let alone the church's Big Stories. If the church is not explicitly present in the midst of this new experience, it cannot be the people's church. Some years ago I spoke with a pastor, the president of whose congregational council was a friend of mine. In the course of the conversation, a question arose in my mind: I asked the pastor if she knew what the president's regular occupation was, and the pastor said that she did not. I responded that that seemed strange to me, that a pastor would not know what parishioners, even leaders in the congregation, do with their everyday lives. The next summer, in a course for about 35 pastors, I repeated the story. I was completely bowled over when about half of the class defended the pastor, with the comment that I was out of touch if I thought a pastor could know the occupations of parishioners. I may be out of touch, but so are those pastors. A layperson's

life is lived out mostly on the job and in the home, not in the sanctuary or at congregational council meetings. My guess is that, fortunately, most of the congregational council lay members knew what their president did for a living, so they could be the people's church for that president. If they did not know, how could they interface with the lives of the people in that parish?

New experiences are experiences that require the greatest energy from the church to incorporate into their little and Big stories—local parish, synod, churchwide office, seminary, and all other forms of the church. A woman recently told me that the twelve longest days of her life were the days between the time of her amniocentesis and the report from the doctor whether her fetus was healthy or defective. She did not share those twelve days with her pastor, because she could not add to her already huge load of anxiety the added uncertainty whether her pastor and her parish would support her if she decided that an abortion was called for.

In the next few years, as a result of genetic testing on infants and young children, more and more of the persons who sit in our pews on Sunday morning will carry within them what a *New York Times* writer has called "toxic knowledge." Toxic knowledge includes the knowledge that a person has a genetic propensity for such diseases as early onset Alzheimer's disease, or breast cancer, or heart disease, while they also know that there is a very slim chance that genetic therapy will be available for their condition; if they are lucky, there may be alternative life styles that will reduce their risk. Children, their parents, and their siblings may carry this toxic knowledge for decades, throughout the growing-up years. Prospective insurers, employers, and marriage partners will want to have access to this knowledge, as well. What does grace mean in this situation? God's will and predestination? Death? The answers to these and other questions of life's meaning will be acted out in the domain of the common life, where little stories will be fashioned to make that meaning concrete. Early and unofficial returns indicate that people are *not* bringing these stories to their pastors and their congregations—perhaps because they fear that the precious community they find in their congregation will be shattered by these heavy loads that it cannot bear.

In situations like these, little stories will have to come forth at the local levels of life, because at present here is no Lutheran or Christian theology of toxic knowledge, nor of abortion for medical reasons, nor is there a Lutheran spirituality for the twelve days of amniocentesis, nor for the calculated thoughts of suicide on the part of those who have no intention whatsoever of living through their possible early onset Alzheimer's disease. These are new experiences, or new forms of perennial experience, and we face the challenge to elaborate Christian and Lutheran stories that can bear the meaning of these experiences as they arise in our ELCA communities. Such resources are surely present in our traditions, but we shall have to mine them carefully and persuasively in order to meet the challenges.

There are other areas of experience that are not exactly new to us, but which we have yet to incorporate into the little stories of the people and felate to the church's Big Stories. We generally do much better, for example, in understanding what it means to be the church in the suburbs than in the center city, in the older, stable rural areas than in the rural communities that are in danger of collapsing. These areas of experience are new for us in that they are the result of technological change and the accompaniments to that change. Similarly,

we are not at all clear about how the church is to be church in the domain of lived-out institutional and unaware societal racism, the racism of people and congregations that have never spoken with an African American, who see African Americans only rarely, who have no idea that they are racist. For most white American ELCA members, since the experience of being racist is itself a foreign notion, how much less familiar is the effort to understand this lived-out racism in a churchly Christian context.

A plurality of lived-out domains. Second, we are aware that there are so many different cultures, such a plurality of domains of lived-out existence in these United States and in our ELCA. As I have suggested several times in these lectures, we are well aware that the critical conditions of life today in our society depend on how these different cultures are acknowledged, and how they interact with one another in larger communities. Our Big Stories have to be interpreted in ways that are big enough and dynamic enough to relate to all of the little stories that people live by today, otherwise we will not have a church, but rather an uneasy coalition of churches that may or not be able to be an ELCA.

Since I have already given some attention in previous lectures to describing the plurality of cultures in the United States and in the ELCA, and since this is a matter of common knowledge to us, I will not reiterate that description, but I will concentrate on interpreting it.

Two key terms in our church's prevailing rhetoric these days are "multiculturality" and "inclusiveness." In the present context of these lectures, these terms take on very specific meanings. Although these meanings are rather straightforward, they may appear novel in our current ELCA public discourse, because they deepen our prevailing discussion. "Multiculturality" most often refers both to the actual composition of the ELCA and also to its perceived mission goal to become a microcosm of the multicultural United States (and global) society, since, indeed, God's will encompasses all cultures. "Inclusiveness" is generally interpreted as the ELCA's effort to reach out and include diversities of culture within itself, and to insist that this reaching out be reflected in its official language, its worship, its leadership recruitment, its administrative and governing policies, and in its theological education activities.

These conventional meanings are correct, and their thrust is surely a welcome response to the gospel of the church's Lord. To place them in the context of the people's church adds something to their meaning for us. "Multiculturality" points not only to the diversity within society and church and to the mission mandates of the church, it also gives expression to the fact that there is staggering plurality of domains of lived-out existence in which the church is called to be church. Or, we might say that there is plurality of domains that present little stories of meaning that are to be related to the Big Story. The shape of the sacred spaces in which faith happens is multifarious. In a sense multiculturality denotes not so much an area of mission that the ELCA must go forth into as it does a map of the domains of actual lived meaning in which the ELCA is called to be church, a symphony of little stories to which the Big Story of the church wants to relate.

"Inclusiveness" does not so much describe the church's effort to include all diverse groups within itself, nor to create a "politically correct" use of language and practice of polity, as it signifies the church's acknowledgment of the domains of life and faith in which its various peoples carry out their existence. Inclusive language is not an

attempt to change God's gender so much as it is an acknowledgment that the coherence and project of being woman is a domain of faith in which the ELCA, including the men of the ELCA, can be church. Inclusiveness of employment practices and of both appointive and elective leadership in the church is not an instance of the law of political correctness; it is rather a demonstration that the ELCA desires to be church in the domains in which its people come to faith.

4. The ELCA and the people's church

A challenge to Lutheran sensibilities/A call to the possibilities of our tradition. I have suggested at several points that the challenges that face us in the ELCA do at significant points encounter us at places of our vulnerability, our weakness, if you will, and not at our points of strength. I am convinced both that we must recognize this fact, rather than deluding ourselves that we are strong at all points, and also that once we have acknowledged that we are leading from our vulnerabilities, we will be in a better position to respond in ways that are genuinely faithful and helpful. Earlier, I called attention to our vulnerability at the point of recognizing plurality as a gift, since we tend to view plurality as the raw material for turning into oneness; I also observed that belonging without conditions comes hard for us, because we tend to make truth a condition for belonging. The reality of the people's church also strikes us at a weak point.

As in the previous discussions of how we respond in our vulnerability, I will (a) describe the challenge at our weak points and then (b) suggest how we may draw from our resources to meet the challenge. I will interpose between these two sections a discussion of current developments in our church that are relevant as we respond to the challenge of the people's church. I keep in mind that the description of weakness always comes more easily than construction, and these lectures demonstrate that. I am not so much constructing an adequate response as I am mapping the terrain where others may join in the effort to allow our tradition's possibilities to spiral forth in new and wholesome ways to meet the challenges of our time.

> Our Big Stories have to be interpreted in ways that are big enough and dynamic enough to relate to all of the little stories that people live by today.

A. The dimensions of our vulnerability

The vulnerability of our official church tradition. The Lutheran tradition is heavily invested in the official church, and the ELCA is no exception. This investment manifests itself in many ways. We have, for example, held fast to the following notions:

1. One Lutheran faith. Justification is its center as defined in the Augsburg Confession. We are reminded of Robert Wilken's analysis of Lutheranism in the sixteenth century as focusing upon one single idea as the mark of catholicity, applied by Flacius in his history of the church. We have held to the concept of the Word of

God, and by that we have meant only one word, justification.

2. One Lutheran theology. This theology consists of some version of Luther's basic system of thought or, a version of the constructive sections of the Augsburg Confession. Alternative types of theology have simply been rejected, because there can be only one official theology. There are several ways in which this has worked itself out. One way was described by Albrecht Ritschl, namely, that the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession's term "teaching of the gospel" centers on the *teaching*, which amounts to the Augsburg Confession itself as the pattern for theology, or on the *gospel*, which amounts to only one legitimate central theme, justification. The traditional stance of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has followed Ritschl's first strategy, while Lundensian theology has followed the second. The theological work of the Lutheran World Federation has until very recently proceeded on the assumption that there is one way of doing theology in a Lutheran mode. The concern for *identity* in the ELCA and the call to faithfulness that often goes with it can be interpreted from this perspective as an effort to resist all efforts to introduce fundamental pluralism into the traditional Lutheran insistence on one normative idea and one authoritative theological exposition of that idea.

It is not our theology that inhibits lay ministry, but rather our commitment to the one official church.

3. One Lutheran education for clergy. Most of our predecessor denominations allowed only one seminary and one curriculum for the education of pastors. Uniformity continues to a great extent in the ELCA. The protest from some quarters that so-called second career and alternative track students are inadequately formed in the ethos of the church's ministry appears very likely to be the expression of the official church that non-official ethos may be disruptive of its one ethos.

4. One doctrine of ministry. Our recent struggle to define the ministry found it practically impossible to acknowledge the ministry of parochial school teachers as the LCMS had. Deaconesses have had a precarious existence in our predecessor denominations for more than a generation. Lay ministries have been a stepchild, despite Lutheran theology's high valuation of the laity. It is not our theology that inhibits lay ministry, but rather our commitment to the one official church. Our opening to the Episcopal church has brought an encounter with another little story that pertains to the one ministry, a little story that challenges the right of our little story to be equated with the Big Story.

5. One theology of the sacraments. We have persistently defined ourselves in terms of a single theological interpretation, including the Real Presence. Our opening to the Reformed churches has brought an encounter with other little stories that we have for centuries rejected. The proposals for church fellowship constitute an effort to relate these stories in ways that differ from the ways that have prevailed since the celebrated Marburg Colloquy of 1529.

6. One fundamental principle for inter-

preting Scripture. We have prided ourselves on our "canon within the canon," meaning that whatever the text may appear to mean, whatever the author intended, it must in some fashion be subsumed under the justification principle or it is not truly the Word of God.

7. One requirement for unity in the church. This, too, is rooted in the famous seventh article of the Augsburg Confession. Of course, the *satis est* ("it is enough") is applied differently by different theologians. Our differences with the Episcopalians may be assessed negatively, because they want to add an adiaphoron to the one requirement, while differences with the Reformed may be emphasized on the grounds that they lack the one thing needful.

This catalogue is not meant to be exhaustive. The point is that in all of these cases, there is one official church position delineated, and this official position must override all else. In other words, we might say that the one Big Story is the only story that we have officially acknowledged.

In every one of the seven categories I have listed there has been diversity in Lutheran history, but this diversity is not officially interpreted as positive pluralism, but as deviation from the official church Big Story. Little stories have not fared well. The stories of the saints have been largely rejected. The Epistle of James as a little story has come under critique. Variant ecclesiologies have been rejected as false. In the LCA traditions, the doctrine of the official ministry was honed to a marvelously polished and elegantly conceptualized level, and it was inculcated very effectively to support the national church and the office of the Word as supreme. In the ALC traditions, it was just as staunchly honed and combined with a local view of the church that often viewed the LCA ecclesiology and doctrine of the ministry as sheer bureaucracy and as a corporation model of the church. Any position outside the official one tends to be repressed and ridiculed.

The vulnerability of our tradition as elite church and high culture church. Another way to understand our position vis-a-vis the people's church is that Lutherans are a "high culture" church, *haute couture.* By these terms, I am distinguishing, in German terms, between high German and dialect German; in French terms, the distinction might be between *haute cuisine* and provincial cooking. In music, perhaps between classical and folk. Here again, examples are plentiful.

1. We state our confession of faith in technical theological concepts and terms, including our central phrase, *justification by grace through faith*—terms that originated in the intellectual academic realm and that require sophistication to explain.

2. Our system of theological education has the result of setting our clergy apart from their places of origin and from the laity. We still suffer from a good deal of clericalism. We pride ourselves on a "set apart" ministry, and however we define this "apartness," it has resulted in a dramatic imbalance between our theological reflection on the ordained ministry and the ministry of the laity. We tend to justify and represent our ministry in conceptual terms, and the doctrine of the ministry requires considerable learning and sophistication to explain. The laity of some churches might be able to account for their ordained minister in such simple terms as "he was ordained and sent by the bishop" or "she received the gift of the Holy Spirit" or "we voted him in." No Lutheran layperson could account for his or her pastor's status and role so simply. It would require a rather sophisticated understanding of what it means to fill the office of the Word and Sacrament. The

insistence that academic theologians, "teaching theologians," play a special role in the church's theological self-understanding is an expression of the high culture orientation of the ELCA.

3. We encourage a liturgical worship that is presented in a sophisticated form that scholars have put together and that only scholars can understand in detail. It is the rule that our liturgy can be done by most worshippers only with a printed book or worship folder in their hands. Persons who are challenged in language and reading skills can follow our standard worship only with difficulty. Our relative slowness to offer alternatives or supplements to the *LBW* is part of this elite church style.

4. Our musical heritage is highly sophisticated, academic music. Bach and the chorales are usually identified as "Lutheran" music tradition. Even when Luther's example of employing folk tunes is followed in our hymnody, we insist in printing out the music fully, in both the bass and treble staves, because we count ourselves as an educated community that can read music and sing in harmony as printed in the book. Popular music, swing, rock, or show tune melodies are alien to most Lutheran ears in the context of worship. Almost all of the well-known choirs among American Lutheranism, those that travel, produce recordings, and appear on television, are academic choirs. None that I know of holds to a basic repertoire of popular music, jazz, blues, or Gospel music.

5. We govern our ecumenical relations on a complex set of conceptualities that most of the church members do not understand or even know about. When, as in 1997, we ask our members to accept carefully negotiated agreements with the Episcopalians and the Reformed, we find that not even a majority of the clergy understand either the agreements or the conceptual framework of the ELCA upon which these agreements have been drawn up. Still fewer have an understanding of the quarter century of discussion and negotiation that preceded the current proposals. Consequently, recourse is taken to church-political strategies that only the elite of the ELCA can be privy to.

6. The expectation for the life of our congregations, as set forth in our theology and, even more significantly, in the model constitutions, follows organizational patterns based on the committee structure and lines of administrative authority that are indigenous to educated, competent, experienced middle class persons.

Can the people's church co-exist in the ELCA? We have surveyed the scholars' descriptions of how the official church and the elite church tend to militate against the people's church. The obstacles they pose to the people's church may be intentional, based on considerations of power, but they may also be unintended and even unwanted obstacles. The official church that encourages no other stories and ways of living will be inhospitable to the faith stories and practices that originate in the particular domains of experience where the people live out their lives. This official church will not acknowledge that there are valid little stories that supplement and enrich its Big Story. The elite or high culture church will be just as inhospitable to the people's culture. On the one hand, the people are not nearly sophisticated enough in the stories and practices of the elite to be able to function easily. On the other hand, they will not find the culture of the elite satisfying or even meaningful for the faith they have appropriated where they live. In short, the ELCA, to the extent that it does identify itself largely in its official and high culture forms, is ill-prepared to respond to the people's church.

B. Current ELCA developments that are relevant to the people's church

Signs of the people's church in the ELCA. The analysis of the ELCA I have just proposed may be accepted as valid, but it does not tell the entire story of our church by any means. The people's church and the people's little stories are not absent from our midst. In fact, the people's church is a strong stream in the ELCA that is actually determining our theology and practice in some areas.

1. One of the most dramatic manifestations of the people's church is taking place in our "official" policy on theological education and our recruitment and selection of clergy candidates. Our seminaries are being moved to redefine their traditional constituencies and, for the most part, to link their futures with other seminaries in ways that will make a difference. Some of this has already been under way for years prior to the present policy formation. Seminaries are also being directed to offer their resources in new ways, in new places and situations, to new types of persons. The phenomena of "second career" and commuter students, as well as alternative track students, have already brought the cultures of the people into the official and elite cultures of the church's training centers. When one thinks of the anthropologist's interpretation of educational institutions as the agencies whereby the community's values are indoctrinated through the socialization process of education, then the significance of new kinds of students is better understood. The culture of the clergy is at stake, and it is being stretched in the direction of the people's cultures.

Furthermore, that culture is becoming more diverse. There is no longer, even now, one or even just a few "ideal types" of ministerial candidate, nor is there only one track of education for ordination. The principal rites of passage for candidates now are CPE and internship, and since the sites for these experiences are diverse, it means that there is even less a common experience of passage that marks all clergy than there has been in the past generation. The ordination of women is a major factor here.

2. The mission goals of inclusiveness and evangelism that have been in place in the ELCA since 1988 are highly significant forces of the people's church. These goals and their enabling policies have brought people's cultures into the life of the church at both the churchwide and local levels. Most of the representatives of alternative cultures in church leadership positions share the culture of middle-class mores and competence. Other mores and other kinds of competence are not well represented. The sharp protests against inclusiveness goals and so-called "quotas" reveal that the cultures of the official and the elite church perceive the strong entry of alternative cultures into their previously held terrain. The theological forcefulness with which these protests are articulated also reveals that the entry of alternative cultures is not just an issue of power or mores, but also of faith. The little stories that the elite church often finds so objectionable are neither banal nor otiose, they are dynamic expressions of faith that require accommodation by the official and the elite church.

3. The widespread demand for "alternative worship" forms is in our congregations a sign that the cultures of the people's church are making themselves felt and even determinative in our congregations.

4. The strong expressions of negativity toward the churchwide offices of the ELCA and other churchwide entities, like seminaries, as well as the decline in financial support for these aspects of the church, are certainly relevant signals of the ferment that is occurring in the ELCA along the interface

It is time to recognize the polemic of identity and faithfulness for what it is: A protest against the ELCA's trajectory toward becoming people's church.

between the official and elite church and the people's church. What this signal indicates is not so simple to understand, however. On the one hand, it might be the protest of the people's church that exists at the grassroots against those aspects of the church's organization that are inhospitable to the people and their little stories, and as such it may indicate that the grassroots places a higher priority on the local communities of the ELCA where the people live. On the other hand, since in some ways the churchwide expressions of the church and the seminaries have been among the most significant points of entry for the alternative cultures and stories of the people, in a strange way, the official and elite church are most firmly represented in certain regions and localities more than in the church's national headquarters and seminaries. There is, for example, more cultural diversity in the church's headquarters and in the seminaries than in the vast majority of our congregations and synods. Even this diversity, however, occurs within structures that represent the culture of the established churchwide institution of the ELCA. The various factors are too complex and interwoven to support any simple identification of the national structure with the official church and the congregations with the people's church. But there can be no doubting that something significant is at work in the tense relations between grassroots and churchwide expressions of the ELCA

5. Despite all forces to the contrary, the theological consensus of the ELCA is becoming less solid every year. The diversity of teachers and theological stances in our seminaries makes the ideal of "one Lutheran theology" less real than at any time in the last half century.

6. The struggle to interpret Scripture in diverse ways, as I described earlier, is a sign of diverse people's cultures entering into our common ELCA life.

5. Defining the issues for the ELCA and the people's church

The mission goals of the ELCA since 1988. In many respects the high flying intentions of the ELCA, expressed in 1988 and growing out of the Commission on a New Lutheran Church, seem to have gone sour, unrealized, and the source of much discontent. Gender inclusiveness constitutes a battle on issues of gender and language; women are ordained but in many respects are not afforded equal status with male clergy. Multicultural groups voice their dissatisfaction with their place in the overall structure of the ELCA and its synods. The evangelism goals aimed at significant increases in African American and Hispanic-Latina members and congregations, but these groups still comprise a very small percentage of the ELCA, far less than the 1988 goals hoped for. Inclusiveness goals or quotas have been protested strongly in the most recent times.

I would argue, however, that these indicators are misleading. The 1988 goals have in fact made a great impact on the ELCA, in that they have been integral to the six signs (just noted) of the entree of the reality of the people's church into the ELCA, and also in that they have succeeded to the point where the pain, struggle, and opposition that accompany the interaction with the people's church are becoming clearer and more intensely articulated every day. If the realities of the people's church were not making a strong showing in our church, we would not be witnessing the turmoil and controversy that we observe all around us.

The din of polemic and protest. Much of what presents itself as scholarly and intellectual theological criticism of the ELCA and concern for the faithfulness and identity of the ELCA is in fact expression of the rather predictable and stereotypical discomfort of the official and elite church against the realities of the people's church. The fact that some of these protesting groups tend to situate themselves on the periphery of the churchwide expressions of the ELCA indicates the sense in which the churchwide expressions represent the people's church as much they do the official and elite church. This reinforces the complex character of the interface between these contrasting elements in the ELCA.

If my interpretation is correct, then it is a mistake of considerable proportions for us to respond to the calls for faithfulness and 'pure' Lutheran identity in terms of the categories that the adherents of these movements represent themselves. The central issues are *not* simply those of whether the ELCA is becoming too much a mainstream denomination, nor that it is losing its sense of true Lutheran identity, nor that it is betraying its nature as church, nor that it is in danger of becoming all things to all people, pursuing an "anything goes" strategy. If we accept these categories of discussion as normative, we shall simply induce more anger, guilt, and defensiveness among those who find the ELCA a vibrant and earnest expression of the church. And most ELCA members do image their church life in these terms.

It is time to recognize the polemic of identity and faithfulness for what it is: A protest against the ELCA's trajectory toward becoming people's church. If we do recognize this fact and define the terms of the discussion accordingly, we will be able to debate the issues more realistically. Can the ELCA survive along this trajectory? Does the ELCA still want to follow this trajectory?

Turmoil, but not an either-or. The interface of the people's church and the official-elite church is not very often a tranquil one. It can at times be tempestuous. It can be marked, as Garcia-Rivera describes it in sixteenth century Latin America, "a violent and unequal encounter of cultures." One might even argue that Luther's Reformation precipitated such a conflict, partly because it represented (ambiguously, to be sure) certain northern European cultures whose little stories were not acknowledged by the church and the Empire that were centered in Mediterranean Europe.

As we have already observed, however, the people's culture of little stories does not aim to destroy the official-elite church, nor to supplant it. On the contrary, the people's cultures represent new life for the official-elite church and its Big Story, because the people's church offers its people trustworthy vehicles whereby their trusted little stories can be placed within the Big Story and thereby these stories will be deepened and broadened while the Big Story finds its network of living roots extended.

Our present polemical situation clouds this facet of our current situation almost totally. Often we accept the secular image of "culture wars" to interpret the conflictual rubbing together of the various cultures in our church and of the people's church with the official-elite church. This is not totally inaccurate, but the image of wars between culture misses the most fundamental point, that the cultures of the people, the domains of life in which faith occurs, are clamoring for acknowledgment by the official church and also for integration within it. We tend to look upon the gender inclusive language proposals as controversies between either-or, rather than as opportunities for enhancing both the feminist proposals and the traditional formulations. We look upon the African American insistence on James' insight that faith without works is dead as an alternative to forensic justification rather than an occasion for mutual enhancement.

The terms of our public ELCA discourse often present us with the prospect of a transition from a purer, more authentic Lutheranism to a less faithful and diluted Lutheranism, or, conversely, urge us to make the transition from a less pure to a more pure form. This is an unhelpful way of framing the discourse. The more accurate image is that of a transition from a more monocultural official and elite church to what we might call a church of "social polychromy," a polychrome[34] church whose official and elite character is rooted firmly in the church of the peoples. The turmoil and discomfort will not disappear, but they will be understood as signals of a future happening quite differently from what our current discussion understands.

The transition includes mutual critique. The people's cultures are thoroughly critical of the official-elite church, because it resists their little stories and their ethos. I have given at least implicit attention to this critique throughout this lecture. However, the church of the peoples is not beyond critique. My comments above on how Big Story and little stories interact suggested two important areas of critique exercised by the Big Story on little stories: the demand to acknowledge that the world of the Christian faith extends beyond any particular community and the critique of stories that seem to contradict the Big Story (such as vengeance of God upon the community's foes). To these, we can add the critique that is implied in the following questions:[35]

(a) The church of the peoples often expresses itself as a *way* of life more than as a *view* of life. The official-elite church must not base its critique on what is said to the exclusion of what is done in the people's churches. The deeds of the people as well as their stories call for acknowledgment, rapprochement, and critique with the Big Story of the church.

(b) Do the deeds and the stories of the people's church bring the people more into harmony with the identity conveyed by the Christian tradition? Do they actually free people to be more Christian?

(c) Do the deeds and stories of the people help the people both to recognize their sin and to receive God's grace in Christ?

(d) Do the deeds and stories of the people broaden the horizons of the official church's understanding of what constitutes full Christian life in the world? Do they deepen the church's understanding of justice, celebration, and grace?

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[34] Cited in Garcia-Rivera, 44. The term "social polychromy" is from Pedro Rodriguez Crespo, *Biblioteca Hombres del Peru, vol. 5. San Martin de Porres* (Lima: Antonio Miro Quesada, 1964), 60.

[35] Robert Schreiter, 141-2.

6. Eliciting Lutheran resources

There are five resource areas within the Lutheran tradition that I believe will serve as grounding for the transformation of our possibilities within the medium of the people's church.

1. Lutheran history as a little story. The origin of the Lutheran Church in the Reformation of the sixteenth century has the marks of a little story. Luther himself, as son of the dynamic changing German sociocultural context of later fifteenth century Saxony and also as Augustinian monk, can be described as a little person. His reformative thrust emerged from his vulnerability, his humility, his uncertainty. The nailing of the 95 Theses was the act of a little person promulgating his little story.

Even though the ruling house of Saxony was powerful, its position vis-a-vis the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy was arguably rooted in the dynamics of a culture that was struggling to come into being, to be acknowledged, and to be recognized as the equal of the imperial, southern European culture.[36]

The scenarios of Luther at Worms, the Confessors at Augsburg, the Schmalkaldic Federation challenging the Empire—these are all the scenarios of little people waging a strenuous effort for their stories to be acknowledged within the Big Story of their time. Luther's struggle over the interpretation of Scripture and even Flacius' effort in the great church history of the Magdeburg Centuries bear the marks of an insistence that a hitherto unrecognized story be given its place. In this sense, Baronius' counter-history stands as an expression of the official church and official culture to reject the little story of the Lutherans.

If we interpret our history as that of a little story, we will be sensitive to the essential rightness of the people's church expressions in our midst today. Our official and elite church can with integrity refuse to reiterate the defensive and rejecting response that Lutherans experienced in the sixteenth century at the hands of the official church of the Holy Roman Empire.

2. Luther's example of reaching out to the people's culture. Luther's outreach to the indigenous culture of his day is both significant and impressive, even if it is true that he did not reach out to all segments of his society and even though his work was manipulated by nearly every element of that society. He turned the theological evaluation of culture upside down in his assault on the official church's evaluation of clergy and members of religious orders as the models of Christian spirituality and vocation. This assault is mirrored in the Augsburg Confession's critique of religious orders and in its definition of Christian perfection in terms that are at home primarily in the life of the laity.[37] This Copernican revolution evaluated the life of the laity as the primary place of God's work in the world, and is nowhere more clearly enunciated than in the Lutheran theology of vocation, the exaltation of marriage and family life, and in the concept of the priesthood of all believers.

I have defined the people's church in relation to the lived-out domains of life in which persons meet God and find the meaning of their lives. Luther's Copernican

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[36] The task of interpreting these historical issues is formidable, and my interpretation is certainly rough and could be disputed. The relevance of my comments and an illumination of the issues is easily accessible in Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), especially chapters 1 and 2.

[37] *CA* XXVII, par. 49; see Tappert, 79. *Apol.* XXVII, pars. 37, 49-50; see Tappert, 275, 277.

The nailing of the 95 Theses was the act of a little person promulgating his little story.

revolution opens us authentically to these domains. Lutheran theology undergirds this opening in its insistence that the finite world is capable of bearing the presence of God (*finitum capax infiniti*). This insistence is enshrined in our theology of the sacraments, especially in the theology of the Real Presence. We will also find theological resources for appreciating popular cultures and their diversity in the famous *satis est* of Article Seven of the Augsburg Confession that I discussed in the first lecture. Properly understood, this article allows and encourages the cultivation of the adiaphora, the multifarious aspects of our life and faith that cannot be allowed to divide us and which can be bearers of the message and reality of the grace of justification.

This revolution in approach is, furthermore, manifested in Luther's appreciation of earthiness, his elaborated positive theology of creation, his insistence on the use of the vernacular languages in translating the Bible and in liturgy, as well as his use of folk and other secular music in his hymn writing.

We can be liberated in following this trajectory that Luther set in motion.

3. The Pauline roots of Lutheranism. However we interpret the core New Testament texts on justification, in Romans and Galatians, it is clear that the *consequences* of Paul's commitment to the message of justification by grace were his outreach to the people's cultures of his time. I have already alluded to the conflict depicted between Paul and Peter on the circumcision issue. For over a century scholars have pointed out that in this context the justification doctrine had powerful cultural and ethnic consequences. The encounter between Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, was an encounter between an official culture and a people's culture, and the outcome of this encounter was the decoupling forever of Christ's gifts of renewal and redemption from any official culture.

4. The priesthood of all believers. The concept of the universal priesthood is ancient and deeply rooted in the Old and New Testaments. The concept holds that the entire nation of Israel exercises a priesthood, by virtue of it being constituted by God to be a priestly nation. The church sees itself as a continuation of Israel's constitution as a priestly people, and Luther enunciated this idea most vigorously in his deconstruction of the official church and culture of his day. In his treatise, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," he wrote his famous words, "Every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man, but because Christ himself has begotten him as a priest and has given birth to him in Baptism."[38] We know that this does not make every person an ordained pastor, but it does express a solidarity of Christians in the priesthood of God's mission of grace to and within the world.

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[38] Martin Luther, *Commentary on Psalms*. See Cheryl Stewart's reflection upon these themes in terms of ELCA and African American communities in Pero and Moyo, 182f.

This doctrine did play a role in the liberation of the laity in the time of the sixteenth century Reformation, precisely because it played a major role in establishing the domains of lived-out life as the sacred spaces where God's grace and God's work were made efficacious. Today this doctrine can likewise enable us in the ELCA to situate ourselves constructively within the medium of the people's church as a significant place where our transformation will take place.

5. Lutherans have demonstrated in their mission activity that no people's culture is alien to Lutheranism. We may criticize much of Lutheranism's mission outreach around the world in the nearly five centuries of its existence, and no one will deny the validity of such criticism. Nevertheless, this mission outreach has been an affirmation of the *finitum capax infiniti* in the sense of all cultures being fit vehicles of the church and its Faith. Even where we have done it wrong, and when we have been paternalistic and imperialistic, thus resisting the people's culture, our very presence as missionaries and the emergence of people's churches all over the world has demonstrated that our resistance was playing against character. The existence of Lutheran churches in every continent, often in strength of numbers, demonstrates that Lutheranism is not intrinsically monocultural or at home only in a single high culture or elite culture. The playing out of this diversity of cultural orientation within the life of the Lutheran World Federation has given some impressions of the weakening of that federation, but from another perspective the tensions manifested there are a demonstration of the perennial Pauline conviction that no culture is the official culture of the church.

I believe that these resources from our Lutheran tradition are rich assets for us as we seek to follow God's transformative call to the ELCA in our time. I have not elaborated them; that is the task for subsequent lectures of mine, and even more, for others in our church. As I conclude, I want to point us toward a rich resource that is found mainly outside the Lutheran tradition, but one which increasing numbers of Hispanic/Latina Lutherans are articulating for us.

Mestizaje: Transformation and newness

Hispanic-Latina theologians and historians have emphasized that the encounter of the people's church with the official-elite church results in something new. The Great Mestizaje, the great "mixing" that began in Latin America in the sixteenth century, was a massive biological and cultural mixing that gave rise to a new race and new cultures. It stands as an awesome instance of transformation, in which the possibilities of the people were given dramatic new expression, in a painful process of mixing. Three races and cultures met in the sixteenth century "violent and unequal encounter of cultures": the Africans who were in Latin America, the native Indians, and the Spanish who came as *conquistadores*. What emerged was truly *mestizo* ("mixed"), in the dimensions of biological intermarriage and procreation, culture, religion, and all other facets of life.

The Mexican-American anthropologist and theologian, Virgil Elizondo, speaks of the "ultimate" and "universal" Mestizaje, and he sees a particular role for the United States in this movement.[39] On the one hand, Americans in the United States are mixing

[39] Virgil Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer Stone, 1988), esp. chap. 7. See also his *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American*

Our pain and turmoil and our confusion about the big questions... signal that something genuinely new is summoning itself through us.

their culture with every other culture in the world through U.S. involvement all over the world and the export of its cultural products, while, on the other hand, the territorial borders of the United States are witnessing one of the most complex and large-scale mixings that world history has ever seen.

The United States is not so dissimilar from sixteenth century Latin America in this respect. *Time* magazine, two years ago, devoted an entire issue to "the new multicultural society of the United States." Its cover consisted of an entire page of postage stamp-sized facial portraits that emphasized the skin colors and facial structures that comprise U.S. society today, and some of the blendings that are taking place in our own United States *mestizaje*. We, too, are undergoing a great mixing that is both biological and cultural, and we, too, are caught up in the painful process of giving birth to the new that God's possibilities within us can become. The Latin American mixing raised all of the big questions: What does it mean to be human? What is God doing in our situation? What does it mean to be faithful to God and to the Christian tradition in our situation?

Much of this mixing and transformation occurs in the interaction between the little stories of the people and the Big Story of the church. Questions arise within this interaction: What is the Big Story of the ELCA? We have always experienced a tension within Lutheranism between tendencies that seek to integrate Lutheran distinctiveness within the larger Christian story that we call catholic, on the one hand, and those that insist on a distinctive Lutheran story that is compelling only to those who share the experience of the Lutheran Reformation. We will benefit from open discussion and debate between these tendencies. For example, do we insist that the justification doctrine, as Lutherans define it and articulate it, is in fact the Big Christian Story, which all Christians should acknowledge? This is the position that the Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles, as I reported his position above, rejected. This may be the position of the tradition that has called itself "Confessional" Lutheranism. Or do we hold that the justification doctrine is itself a little story that emerged from northern European Lutheran people's experience, which must be integrated within the Big Christian Story that is also comprised of other little stories? If we hold this position, do we then confess this Big Story as our Lutheran story? This may be the position of the several traditions of evangelical catholicity and evangelical catholicism that have existed within Lutheranism. How does the story (or *the* story) of the Bible relate to our Lutheran Story? In what idiom is it to be told? How does this Big Story, however we define it and tell it, relate to the particular stories told by the people about their faith, about the meaning of their lives? Can, for example, the Big Lutheran Story comprehend the African American Lutheran story as it is expressed in the Harare declaration? Can the Big Lutheran Story comprehend femi-

nist Lutheran stories?

The ELCA, along with all other churches, is called to be church in this United States. As a consequence of that call, we, too, are experiencing *mestizaje*. I noticed that even in the small-town plains country churches of St. Theresa's and Our Redeemer's. Of course, all of the big questions are arising: What does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to be Lutheran? What does the symbol of transformation through *mestizaje* contribute to our understanding? It tells us that our pain and turmoil and our confusion about the big questions are not due to our straying, nor to our unfaithfulness, but rather they are signals that something genuinely new is summoning itself through us, from the self that is not ours but God's. These are signals that something wants to come forth, spiralling out from the life even of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Witness to God's Christic purposes in the world

In the early 1980s I wrote a long essay on the church, in which I defined the distinctive purpose of the church. I wrote that the distinctiveness of the church lies in its intentional and explicit witness to the presence and will of God in the world as that is set forth in Jesus Christ.[40] These present lectures continue in that same framework of thought. God's work today is, I firmly believe, the work of transforming our God-given possibilities into the future that God wills. I also believe that in the United States this includes the work of *mestizaje* and the emergence of new races and new cultures.

The church's place in salvation. God's process of transforming the creation and its possibilities, of transforming us, the ELCA, is not separate from God's work of salvation. The church becomes a witness to salvation when it faithfully witnesses to God's work of *mestizaje* and transformation. In this transforming work, and in the two examples I have set forth, the community of belonging without conditions and the community of the people's church, the hopes of God for the world and the hopes of the world for God come luminously to the fore. To the extent that the church bears witness to this work of God and the hopes of God and the hopes of the world, it is a witness to God's salvation and a locus of participation in that salvation.

I am convinced that God in Christ is present in our ELCA, and that the great mixing work that God is doing in the United States is also God's work in the ELCA, since the ELCA is called to witness to God's work in the world. Little wonder that the life of the ELCA in these days is tumultuous. Little wonder that it brings us pain and grief. Little wonder that being Christian today and being church today is an exciting, demanding life that exists at the very heart of what God and God's world are about. The resources from our distinctive Lutheran tradition, enhanced by the re-

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Promise (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), where he writes: "French biologist J. Ruffie maintains that from the birth of Europe, thirty-five thousand years ago, when the invading Cromagnons integrated with the indigenous Neanderthals, no ethnogenetic event of similar magnitude took place until the birth of Mexico, less than five hundred years ago. I am of the opinion that a similar event of at least equal magnitude has already begun to take place in the Southwest of the United States of America—an area larger than Western Europe and populated by some thirty-five million persons" (p. 5). In his 1988 book, Elizondo extends his interpretation not only to the rest of the world but particularly to what is happening in the United States.

[40] *Christian Dogmatics* 2:187-91.

sources of other Christian brothers and sisters, are God's gifts to our church, bestowed upon us for our faithful acceptance of the transforming call that God is issuing to us today.

In drawing together some of the strands of this lecture that point to the emergence of the new humanity and the new church from God's transforming "mixing" in our time, I quote from Virgil Elizondo:

> The new *mestizaje* that is taking place in diverse forms every place on the globe represent a breakthrough to a new humanity... there will emerge a great common unity that we all seek but have not yet experienced. This new unity will not be homogeneity, a humanity without differences; it will be a new mosaic of the human race.... Jesus invites all to a conversion from their old ways to the way of the love of God, neighbor, enemy, and one another.... For Jesus, love of the other allows us to go beyond all our barriers and even transgress our religious taboos if necessary for the sake of the other in need.... This new humanity is emerging in the middle of the American continent. The old Nordic cultures of Europe, which formed the cultural/religious base of the U. S. A., are meeting and merging with the Latin *mestizo* cultures of the old Iberian world, which mesticized with the native nations of the Americas. In the borderlands between the U. S. A. and Mexico, peoples who have never really met before are today meeting one another, intermingling, and becoming a new and united people. Differences are not being destroyed, but they are being transcended and celebrated as together we usher in the beginning of the new race of humanity. We are on the way, that all might truly be a united family of the planet earth.[41]

In this, Elizondo is elaborating what ELCA theologian Albert Pero, who was reflecting upon African American culture, enunciated twenty years ago in his concept of "cultural transcendence."[42]

When we reflect on the placement of the ELCA within this breathtaking framework and the tasks that follow from it, we engage in the profoundest thinking about the church, we engage in ecclesiology of the most important sort. It is an ecclesiology of possibilities transformed by God. It is an ecclesiology of being available to the possibilities of God, even when they seem to be humanly impossible. I am with James Baldwin when he says: "The impossible is the least one can demand." I add: And the impossible is the least that God will accomplish through the availability of what God has created in the first place and resurrected in the second place, including through the church of Jesus Christ.

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[41] Elizondo, 101, 102, 108, 109, 110.

[42] Albert P. Pero, *The Relationship of the Kerygma to the Black Situation, with Special Reference to the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod Educational Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1990, 1975). See also Pero's "The Issue of Power/Authority in the Global Church of the 21st Century," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24:3 (June 1997): 245-51, and "Generations Together," in *Generations Together*, ed. Kay Soder-Alderfer (Chicago: Commission for Multicultural Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995), 9-18.

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—Philip Hefner

Book Reviews

The Risen Lord: The Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith. By Margaret Barker. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997. xvii + 166 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Four of the five chapters in *The Risen Lord*, first published in Great Britain by T&T Clark (1996), focus on the historical Jesus and were delivered as the 1995 Scottish Journal of Theology Lectures at the University of Aberdeen. A final chapter offers an interesting discussion of the figure of the Lamb in the book of Revelation's servant christology and is an expanded version of an earlier article (*Heythrop Journal* 36 [1995] 493-511). The author includes a bibliography and indexes of modern authors and ancient texts.

The Aberdeen lectures build upon Barker's 1992 book, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, in which she argued that "some, perhaps most, [Jews] ... throughout the second temple period" followed the earliest Israelite traditions in not uniformly affirming monotheism. Instead, they held that "Yahweh, the LORD, had been the second God, the guardian angel and patron deity of Israel, the Son of El Elyon" (*Risen Lord*, xi). In the volume under review Barker argues that this early Israelite concept of the Great Angel was taken up by Jesus himself: whereas certain Jews distinguished the deities El Elyon and Yahweh, Jesus—followed by many Christian writers after him—made a distinction between God and himself. Accordingly, Barker attempts to sketch out how Jesus thought of, for example, his atonement, lordship and resurrection in light of the two-deity conception he adopted and modified.

Two examples illustrate the line of argument employed here. First, Jesus understood his resurrection in terms of his mystical experience at baptism at which point he became "conscious of being the LORD," that is, the deity Yahweh (26). Second, with regard to the atonement, "Jesus saw himself as the great high priest" who "would restore the eternal covenant" and "bring healing and renewal for the creation and judgement on Azazel" (81). Others will probably agree that the findings of this study are as peculiar as the premise of the investigation, and that the methodology employed here lies largely outside the broad range of approaches to historical Jesus research entertained by most scholars. More disturbing is the fact that in this, her latest book, Barker seems unaware of, or perhaps unwilling to interact with, pointed criticisms of her argument in *The Great Angel* (e.g., *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 [1993] 795-97, *Theology* 96 [1993] 319-20; contrast Alan F. Segal's more careful, thorough and persuasive analysis along somewhat similar lines of certain later rabbinical texts: *Two Powers in Heaven*, 1977). Given that *The Risen Lord* is primarily a development of the dubious thesis first articulated in *The Great Angel*, I can only marginally recommend this book for those with a particular interest in historical Jesus scholarship.

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The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry. Edited by Richard N. Longenecker. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997. xv + 253 pages. Paper. $25.00.

The authors of the twelve articles in this book discuss the effect of Paul's Damascus road experience on his thought, using "first-class biblical scholarship in a way that is able to be understood by and speaks to the needs of alert and intelligent people in the church today" (ix). All are moderately conservative New Testament exegetes.

Most of the contributors summarize well contemporary scholarship on their chosen topic. The essays include: "History of Interpretation: Interpreting Paul's Conversion Then and Now," by Bruce Corely; "A New Understanding of the Present and the Future: Paul and Eschatology," by I. Howard Marshall; "Israelite, Convert,

Apostle to the Gentiles: The Origin of Paul's Gentile Mission," by Terence L. Donaldson; and "Paul and Justification by Faith," by James D. G. Dunn. These summaries, excellent introductions to given topics in Pauline studies, are the book's most outstanding feature. The novice reader—and the overwhelmed graduate student—soon grasp the essential positions in the discussion instead of "seeing the trees for the forest."

There are two problems with the book. First, there is no adequate definition of conversion. Though the editor, Richard N. Longenecker, concisely and cogently discusses the issue in the introduction (including the so-called "new perspective" on Paul inaugurated by Krister Stendahl over twenty years ago), the remaining contributors fail to define their definition of "conversion." Almost all struggle with the extreme silence of the New Testament about Paul's "pre-conversion" or "pre-Damascus road" outlook. For example, Judith M. Gundry-Volf's essay, "Paul on Women and Gender: A Comparison with Early Jewish Views," provides an excellent summary of ancient Jewish perceptions of women by contrasting Sirach, Philo, and *Joseph and Asenath* to Paul. These contrasts are fruitful but enable Gundry-Volf to say almost nothing about Paul's view of women before and after his experience outside of Damascus.

Second, most unsettlingly and sadly, the essay by the editor, Richard N. Longenecker, inexcusably calls Paul a "fulfilled Jew" (28) and makes the comment, "The straining of his ancestral faith had suddenly given way to realization and fulfillment" (29). Such statements misconstrue the multifaceted nature of Second Temple Judaism and are at best unwittingly anti-Semitic.

Nevertheless, I recommend this book as a summary of modern understandings of Paul's thought on various issues. Each essay is accompanied by a short bibliography containing the most pertinent English speaking scholarship and a smattering of German language articles and monographs. There are no footnotes. Those who preach Paul, college and adult study groups, undergraduates, seminary students, and beginning graduate students would all profit from the use of this book.

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Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack. By G. Lloyd Rediger. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. vii and 200 pages. Paper. $15.00.

This is a dangerous book. Adding the label "clergy killers" to the already prevalent epithets "alligators" and "antagonists" raises hyperbole and polemic in the church to a new and destructive level. Rediger defines clergy killers as "relentless destroyers, empowered by evil, who target moral leaders (usually pastors) for destruction" (p. 123). Yes, there are congregation members who have destructive agendas that get directed at pastors. But in the spirit of Christian charity, these children of God must first of all be understood by their pastors as sick and in need of care. This does not mean their destructive agendas should not be countered and the influence of such persons neutralized. It does mean that pastors must be wise enough, self-differentiated enough, and have a network of consultation and support strong enough to help them maintain perspective in times of conflict.

There are helpful features to this book, for example, the chapters on building support systems and pastoral fitness. But the problem of conflict in the church is framed in such a polarizing way that the sage advice is lost to the effect of instigating paranoia. The sensationalism of this book's title ensures that it will be purchased by many pastors. Even (and especially) if they do not read it, the damage will have been done. The church does not need any more polarizing polemic. Those who would be equipped to deal with conflict in the church would be far better served by learning the basics of family systems theory, such as explained in Edwin Friedman's book, *Generation to Generation* (Guilford) or applied to congregations in Ronald Richardson's *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Fortress).

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Marginality: The Key To Multicultural Theology. By Jung Young Lee. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. 208 pages. Paper. $19.00.

The author of this book, Jung Young Lee, professor of systematic theology at the theological school at Drew University, died in 1996 soon after the publication of this book. Dr. Lee was truly a creative and original thinker who was able to combine his western training and scholarship with eastern religious and cultural insights. He was a prolific writer, publishing more than a dozen academic books before his untimely death. His scholarly contributions were greatly appreciated by scholars in the United States and abroad.

Dr. Lee begins this book with his autobiography, saying "all theology is... rooted in biography." In this autobiography he documents the experience of an author who lived as a person of marginality in American society. He sees his experience of marginal life not as negative, but as a positive center for doing theology. He writes that Jesus Christ was the representative person who lived in the marginality of society. Therefore, the author emphasizes that concern for marginality is to be the hermeneutical principle as well as the content and method of Christian faith and theology. Since Christ was the "margin of marginality," the followers of Christ are also expected to be the people of marginality. The church, the community of marginality, is not to seek a central place in society, but to stay at the margins. In this way the church becomes creative, transforming, and authentic.

This book makes invaluable contributions for better understanding of pluralistic society in the United States, with its history and statistics of immigration. However, the author points out that the peoples of marginality are not only the immigrants, but also the Native Americans, "the most neglected ethnic group." It is amiable to read how Dr. Lee writes about the Native Americans with compassion in the book. He states: "Their [Native Americans'] sacred lands stolen by foreigners and their people massacred almost to extinction, this people endure with a hospitable spirit. They are a truly marginal people in North America." All these people of marginality are calling for the development of a new theology as the key to multi-cultural theology. Certainly this book answers such a call, providing a basis for the development of theology in marginality as a center of theology. This is a book to be required of all seminarians to read before their graduation.

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Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology. By Charles L. Campbell. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. xiv and 289 pages. Paper. $28.00.

Given the tremendous influence Hans Frei's theology has exercised in biblical studies, ethics, and systematic theology, it seemed inevitable that it eventually be applied to homiletics. With the publication of Charles Campbell's *Preaching Jesus*, the "inevitable" has been executed in fine fashion. While not an easy read, Campbell's book is worthy of critical attention, as it not only offers a penetrating critique of recent preaching trends but also provides a compelling (although, I will argue, flawed) vision for contemporary preaching based on Frei's distinctive understanding of the biblical narrative.

After summarizing Frei's theology, Campbell argues that the previous generation of "narrative" preachers have thoroughly misunderstood the nature of both narrative in general and the biblical narrative in particular. In short, contemporary narrative preaching stresses a translational (or correlational) model of theology, posits the experience of the individual as the sole criteria of truth, and emphasizes narrative plot over character. What happens in such an approach, according to Campbell, is that the distinctive element of the biblical witness—the person of Jesus—becomes secondary, if not altogether incidental. Before long, Campbell charges, the Jesus of contemporary preaching becomes merely a personification of acceptance, love, or some other human "good," and preaching becomes a primarily "need-driven" enterprise, no more *crucial* than a class on stress management or assertiveness training.

In the place of such preaching, Campbell recommends adopting Frei's understanding of the power of narrative to create a world into which the reader is invited. By means of such an "intratextual" approach, the preacher is able to render the biblical world (which is, according to this school, the one, true world) which then "ascriptively" absorbs the world of the hearer. Preaching, then, is about upbuilding the church by training Christians to be more "fluent" in the distinctive Christian language, thereby creating a community of disciples which perceives and defines all experience in light of the story of Jesus.

This, however, is where questions arise. Namely, what happens to the world in which the reader presently lives? Does this emphasis on the so-called "real" biblical world misunderstand the good news of the incarnation that in Jesus Christ God came into *this* world to save *this* world? By his eschewing of this world as the arena of God's activity, does Campbell end up advocating a "transubstantiated" homiletic? What of the Reformation emphasis that preaching should proclaim the "for you" quality of the gospel? Does "relevance" to the listeners' world, a driving concern of traditional narrative preaching, enter into the equation at any point?

One suspects that Campbell and Frei would demur that these are simply the wrong questions; nevertheless, they are the questions that many preachers and, far more importantly, their listeners, continue to ask.

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Invincible Warrior: An Illustrated Biography of Morihei Ueshiba, Founder of Aikido. By John Stevens. Boston: Shambhala, 1997. ix and 255 pages. Cloth. $30.00.

Invincible Warrior tells the story of Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the Japanese martial art Aikido. Author John Stevens is a professor of Buddhist Studies at Tohoku Fukushi University and a well-known teacher of Aikido. This book, his latest, combines biography with photographs illustrating the founder's life and art. The book is a valuable resource for students of Japanese religion as well as for students of Aikido and other martial arts. The book is also valuable for Christians who are concerned with violence.

Through rigorous practice of traditional martial arts the founder became a formidable warrior. Then he experienced a transforming revelation and came to understand that "the way of a warrior is to manifest divine love, a spirit that embraces and nurtures all things." After that experience, Stevens claims, the founder's power and abilities were uncanny: he was invincible (47).

In later years the founder would tell his students, "The secret of Aikido is not in how you move your feet, it is how you move your mind. I'm not teaching you martial techniques, I'm teaching you nonviolence" (70). The purpose of Aikido, the founder said, is to "wage peace" and "build a heaven on earth by bringing people together in friendship and harmony" (67; Stevens, *Abundant Peace*, 1987, p. 101). Through rigorous physical practice, Aikido incarnates nonviolence to incarnate the reign of heaven.

This century has been called the most violent in human history. As we near the end of this violent century, the call to "seek peace and pursue it" is urgent (1 Pet 3:11). Christians seeking peace will find Good News in the life and art of the founder of Aikido. The life of the founder of Aikido is a warrior's journey from violence to nonviolence, from waging war to the way of peace (Lk 1:79). His art shows Christians a new way to "not resist" violence but "overcome evil with good" (Mt 5:39; Rom 12:21).

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Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament. Edited by Richard N. Longenecker. McMaster New Testament Studies, No. 1. Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996. xi and 308 pages. $25.00.

This collection of essays launches a new series: McMaster New Testament Studies. The series, designed to be an annual symposium, will address specific NT themes of interest to contemporary Christians. The essays, intentionally written in a style that is comprehensible to interested adults, are by scholars actively engaged in research on their text. As the theme for the inaugural volume, "discipleship" is an essential issue for Christians of this or any other generation. The authors of the essays hold faculty positions in institutions in the United States, Canada, Scotland, and Austria.

The essays are ordered in three sections: "Gospels and Related Material" (i.e. Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, Johannine Literature); "Pauline Letters" (i.e. 1 Thessalonians, 1-2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians); "Other Writing" (Hebrews, James, 1 Peter). While these studies are a fairly comprehensive review of discipleship in the New Testament, no essay examines Galatians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter, or Jude—although some omissions, e.g. Galatians, are more unfortunate than others, e.g. Jude. The authors use a variety of historical (e.g. Larry Hurtado, "Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—and Beyond") and literary approaches (e.g., Terence L. Donaldson, "Guiding Readers—Making Disciples: Discipleship in Matthew's Narrative Strategy"). They all conclude their essays by identifying some specific contemporary implications that they have drawn from the analysis. Overall, biblical scholars will find relatively little that is new in these essays; however, the essays all represent a fresh readable synthesis of contemporary insights. In some instances, the essays are especially creative and expansive in approach (J. Ramsey Michaels, "Going to Heaven with Jesus: From 1 Peter to Pilgrims Progress"); in other instances discipleship is an aspect of a text that has rarely been addressed (David E. Aune, "Following the Lamb: Discipleship in the Apocalypse").

This book, which would be a valuable addition to a pastor's library, would serve as a superb supplementary text in a sustained Bible study. It would make an excellent choice for an adult reading group and will be a great value to undergraduate research. None of the essays is encumbered by notes, although all conclude with a bibliography. Use of the text will be enhanced by an extensive Subject Index (285-88), an Index of Modern Authors mentioned in the essays (289-91), and an Index of Scripture and Other Ancient References (292-308).

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Preaching Helps

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Christ the King, Series C

Of Tractors and Chariots

The last time **Paul Bauermeister** wrote for these pages, he had just finished doing some hard time meditating while pinned beneath a tractor. Actually his good wife Jeannette, who has probably rescued him on more than one occasion from more than one calamity in the making, tells me that he is never happier than when he is lying on his back under some kind of vehicle (but without the thing weighing down on him).

In this set of offerings Paul takes us riding on tanks (Hitler's) and chariots (Naaman's), space ships and roller coasters. His words are wonderful vehicles, well engineered and tuned up, ready to roll. What I mean is, Paul writes with great energy and with obvious delight in his role as story-teller and good-news-sharer.

I am reminded once more of how delightful and how healing it can be when any good story-teller moves into a biblical narrative. Moves in and lives there. Really gets into the story, as we say. Paul gets into the story and helps us to get into the story with him, and into the heads and hearts of the characters in the story.

And like any really good theologian, Paul has a keen eye for the surprising gospel of Jesus Christ. As he wrote his way through these texts, Paul discovered a thread connecting Sunday with Sunday and made some observations at the end of his treatment of Proper 25. I decided to move it up to this point. Paul writes, "If ER can give itself a six part season finale, maybe you would like to consider a five part finale for the liturgical year centered on Grace. Let's call it a 'Festival of Grace.' Proper 25 is about 'Stretched Grace.' Grace gets stretched to include a Publican. Proper 26 shows us 'Radical Grace.' Grace is radical enough to turn around the Chief Publican, Zacchaeus. Proper 27 shows us 'Grace and the Bean Counters,' who just happen to be Job's friends and the Sadducees. Proper 28 is about 'Measuring Grace.' Both Malachi and Jesus talk about the final cataclysm and find Grace large enough to not just survive, but to overcome it. Proper 29 is for Christ the King Sunday and shows us the dying of Jesus. Let's call it 'Grace

Delivered.' This will mark a memorable end to this liturgical year and feels as slick as skiing right behind the snow cats!"

I would add to his list from his own treatments. For Proper 22, "At Last, Grace Manifested." Proper 23, "The Insult of Grace." Proper 24, "Daring to Trust in Grace." Well, maybe my suggestions don't work as well as his own. That's one reason I wouldn't dare try to write all these materials by myself issue after issue.

As we reach the end of Year C and let go of Luke, I am mindful of how much we owe to the writers of these materials month after month. Unfortunately our writers and editors get no monetary compensation. The only reward is the simple satisfaction of extending one's ministry by writing and so becoming to some extent partnered with preachers all over the country, sharing in the ministry of fellow-proclaimers.

Speaking of partnering, I have often thought that it would be good to offer short paragraphs in addition to the somewhat longer "First Readings" and "Pastoral Reflections" of these pages. I am thinking of brief anecdotes, examples or quotations which cast light on some aspect of our texts. Many of you collect that kind of material. Why not send some of it this way for sharing with others? If I use a piece you send along, all I can promise is that it will appear with the note, "submitted by...." Well, I can also promise that it will be read by other preachers, and it may well help many a sermon grow wheels or wings.

Paul Bauermeister has worn many hats, and in fact still wears more than one. He is a former hospital chaplain, inner city pastor, psychologist, teacher, and Seminex—LSTC professor. He has been a cattle rancher and now, at home in Augusta, Missouri, he raises grapes that are made into fine wines, and with his wife the Rev. Jeannette, finds endless delight in their grandchildren.

Thanks to him for his crafty way with words! And good wishes to all of you, the importance of whose words was acknowledged by Luther in the Smalcald Articles: "God has many ways of bestowing grace." And then he names "baptism, absolution, Lord's Supper, sermon, and the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters."

Wishing you good preaching!

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Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 22 October 4, 1998

Psalm 37:1-9
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

First Reading

Good old Habakkuk gives voice to the familiar prophetic cry, "O Lord, how long?" by which he hopes to rally the faithful. Those in Israel who still love the Lord will hear his cry, for it is also their cry. Each of them sees exactly what the prophet sees. Each of them moans the same prayer for deliverance and is grieved at the astonishing silence and apparent inactivity of God. Furthermore, the number of the faithful is decreasing daily as one after another tires of waiting and faith's small flame flickers out, leaving an increasing darkness in the land.

Habakkuk gets their attention by voicing their common cry. He affirms their understanding of the situation by his recital of the details they all see and know. If you read verses 5-7 of chapter 1 the Chaldeans sound like the German army in Europe in 1939. The Germans' air power and panzer divisions made them invincible. Nothing could stop their *blitzkrieg* and, like the Chaldeans, their own response to their invincibility was a terrible arrogance mixed with a casual and horrible cruelty. Habakkuk's word to the faithful contains the notion that military arrogance is loaded with the kind of hubris that leads to disaster. One simply cannot make that many enemies and get away with it. "You will become their booty," he says, and continues, "because you have plundered many nations, all... the people will plunder you." Habakkuk is giving the faithful reasons to wait, but he knows that waiting takes more than reasons. That's why he adds, "the righteous shall live by their faith," a verse that causes Lutherans to snap to attention.

Habakkuk's "faith" is not yet St. Paul's *pistis* nor Luther's *fide*, but rather an earlier precursor, because the revelation given to him was so incomplete. Habakkuk's faith describes how one waits for God's deliverance from somebody like the Chaldeans. One does that by knowing about the connections between arrogance and hubris and disaster, which makes waiting possible. One also accepts God's promise, "it will surely come, written plainly so it can be read while running [and ducking and bobbing and weaving]," which gives them renewed fiber and resolve and community support for their waiting. The waiting is the hard part.

Paul's opening words are full of tenderness and compassion for Timothy as he remembers Timothy's tears and Timothy's mother and grandmother and Paul's own laying on of hands on him. He ends the first section speaking of a spirit of power, love and self-control which offers a fine contrast to the Chaldeans' power which expressed itself in arrogance and violence.

"Do not be ashamed of testifying to our Lord, nor of me," Paul says, naming the fate of those who wait or have faith in vain. "Do not be ashamed," he says, and then backs it up, not with the pride that might come from having preached to thousands in many far off places. Nor does he use the pride that might come from having endured so long alone, hung out there flapping in the wind by non-receptive Jews or posturing pagan priests, both making the most of a photo op. No way! Paul backs up his "Do not be ashamed" with the Grace which God gave us in Jesus Christ and adds this interesting twist, "ages ago."

There is a similarity here to Habakkuk's "faith" in that the faithful person is able to reach beyond self to God to establish a stronger hold on not being ashamed. But Paul's reach beyond is made on the basis of much

more than God's promise. Paul can name the Name. Yet more! Paul can point Timothy to the "truth entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us," which is a present experience for Timothy.

In the Gospel for today St. Luke gives us two little vignettes of Jesus apparently scolding his disciples. Check out this Messianic tough love! Faith is the theme once more, but we need to get the story behind the story to make this one work. The tensions between Jesus and certain of the Pharisees has been building for some time. This is chapter 17. By chapter 23 we have a crucifixion. The disciples have watched Jesus win a few choice scrimmages with the Pharisees. Like any of us, the disciples loved a good fight when somebody else does the fighting, taking the rabbit punches and the elbows and the risks. Jesus' winning made them feel brave and strong just as a good tough professional football game makes us feel brave and strong. They picked up just a little of the arrogance that comes from winning any kind of conflict. It felt good for them to have that extra edge of authority in their voices and a little prideful swing in their walk.

Here they come, swaggering up to him. "Master," they say with a self-satisfied smirk on all twelve faces, "increase our faith!" They thought they were saying exactly what Jesus wanted to hear. They expected Jesus to tell them that they had tons of faith, after all, they had left home and work and family and had followed him, hadn't they? The groupies would see, they would know!

But Jesus was sick of their strutting, rooster-like behavior and let them have it. His words have the push of anger behind them. Introduce the mustard seed parable with these words: "*Increase* your faith? Increase your *faith*? Increase *your* faith? Can't do it! You ain't got no faith to start with, and you don't know nothin' 'bout faith. If you had faith like a mustard seed...."

In the unworthy servant story he continues the reprimand. "Furthermore, you are servants who need to be told to stay in their place. Worse, you are unworthy servants, time serving servants who only do what they absolutely must and care nothing about getting the job done. Jesus looked at them and knew how far they had to go if they were to be ready for what was coming. His heaviness and frustration came from how hard it is for people to hear the Good News of God. Know anything about that, preacher? How gummy and unhearing their ears were! How filmed over and sightless their eyes! How cold and stony their hearts! Scenes like this one let Jesus know that he had more to do. He must go on, go all the way, finally picking up a cross on which to die. In the verse following the Gospel for today, St. Luke tells us that Jesus "...made his way to Jerusalem...." Jesus knew what had to happen to them before they could catch the vision.

Pastoral Reflections

A Gospel like this one, chopped out of a much larger context and read by the preacher before the sermon, makes one wonder about the aptness of the liturgical versicle. Perhaps a question mark or at least a rising inflection would be more fitting. "The Gospel of the Lord???" accompanied by an appropriately wry facial expression.

Nevertheless, there are wads of good, on target, easily transferred Law for us to deal with, and both the prophet and the apostle give us some Gospel to keep us going. Habakkuk does it by hints and foreshadowing; Paul, as expected, with clear and lovely pronouncements of Grace. The preacher's task is to tie the bundle together and deliver it in palatable form.

"O Lord, how long?" Each one of us over 15 has looked at our world and prayed Habakkuk's prayer, and some of us have prayed it for a long time. How many wars can you personally remember? How many famines?

How many starving children have fixed their round vacant eyes on you from the printed page or from the TV screen? And how far have your subsequent prayers pushed you toward some kind of remedial action? Just how much "rekindling" of the gift of God do we need? How worthy is our own Grace-filled servanthood? Talk about a mustard seed!

Or you can easily demonstrate the relevance of the prophet's cry by tying your message less personally. How long have people protested the abuses of power by the IRS? How long has campaign financing been a sore point? Or if those don't ring for you try African war lords or Chinese bureaucrats or Balkan generals. More mustard seeds needed!

As you can see by the above list there is no shortage of Law here. Touch it lightly; remember, it kills.

Want people to understand unworthy servants who only do what they absolutely must do? Two quotes should do it: "Don't tell me about it. I only work here." Or "Sorry 'bout that, but it is not my responsibility." Anybody got a mustard seed?

Quickly now, some Gospel to sweeten the salty bite of all that Law. Paul's is strongest and best: "Stay alive by virtue of God's own purpose and the Grace which God gave us in Jesus Christ long ago." The "long ago" puts a new kind of spin on it: permanence! Grace is not tied to your behavior. It couldn't be because Grace was there before you had any behavior. There's more! "Manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light." Sounds like resurrection talk to me.

Habakkuk: Staying alive takes faith.

Paul: Staying alive takes faith.

Staying alive by the Grace of God that comes to us in our Lord Jesus Christ (also called faith), makes worthy every last unworthy servant among us. Know any? You can forget about that troublesome mustard seed!

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 23 October 11, 1998

Psalm 111
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

First Reading

Get ready for Naaman the Syrian, fearless commander of all the king's armies. The earth trembles beneath Naaman's mighty feet. When Naaman opens his mouth to speak all creatures fall silent. Princes, even proud kings hold their breath in order to hear the words of the great Naaman. Some of us learned about Naaman the Syrian and his encounter with Elijah as young Sunday Schoolers. Being wise Bible students we already knew what Naaman had to learn, namely that Elijah could do anything because he had God's power and if Elijah told you to do something you should do it immediately. To our brave young minds this healing of Naaman the Syrian was peanuts compared to Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal. That story had fire from heaven and a whole bunch more blood, plus a great victory over some very bad guys. Nevertheless, as Elijah lore goes, this story is worth telling because it shows us the connection between Elijah and the rich and powerful Naaman.

This story is usually called Elijah and Naaman, but as you will see, it might more appropriately be named Naaman and the Candy Striper. It also is worth noticing in passing that the real heroine of the story goes without a name. She was the brave young Jewish lass who passed the word about Elijah's healing powers which gave the mighty Naaman the notion of where he might seek a cure for his disease. The irony is that she may have been ripped from home and family by soldiers under the command of the mighty Naaman.

What a graceful payback she makes! In our generation we would certainly name her and memorialize her for her bold witness. We might even build a theme park in her honor. Also worthy of note, should you mistakenly think present day healing carries exorbitant prices, even under managed care, read verses 4-6 to see what the ancients were willing to pay.

Sadly, despite all of Naaman's prominence and fierce power, it is his disease which defines him. The writer does not call him a mighty general who, by the way, happened to have contracted leprosy while on some foreign campaign. The holy writer simply calls him a leper.

Be that as it may, when Naaman's chariot arrived at Elijah's house, Elijah knew he was coming, but I can't imagine what the neighbors thought. This was no ordinary, stripped-down, economy model chariot. Sturdy red leather, stretched over a solid oak framework and bound by four inch bands of gleaming bronze, bearing two shields, one for the mighty general, the other for his huge Nubian driver-bodyguard who rode around in full battle armor. This chariot with its great steel banded wheels was drawn by a proud powerful war horse and immediately attracted a crowd. Their bug-eyed awe kept them from coming close or even speaking.

Now comes the Candy Striper part, the special Elijah twist to the whole story. Elijah does not come running out to greet the proud Syrian, seeking his favor with words of adoration and servitude. The great chariot comes to a stop with a clanking of metal and loud breathing of the war horse. When the cloud of dust settles, who does Elijah send out to instruct the mighty Naaman? Not his Chief of Staff, a venerable, white haired practitioner of the healing arts. Nor does he send a Senior Resident, you know, one of the guys on ER. Nor does he send an Intern, a brand new MD. Not even an RN! A 16 year old female volunteer, a Candy Striper, emerges from the prophet's house lisping instructions that the general must wash seven times in the Jordan River. It almost sounds as though Naaman were not clean enough to enter the prophet's house.

Such an insult! The Syrian is seriously affronted. No one has treated him like this since he left the military academy. He says in effect, "We don't need no stinking river!" and orders his driver to get out quick, "spray some gravel if you can!" Later in the day, after the general's two-Martini lunch, a servant puts a different interpretation on the events and Naaman finally does what we Sunday Schoolers knew he should have done immediately. He takes the seven baths and...finds himself healed! Now it's his turn to praise God. What a story! How the mighty need to be brought low so that they might be helped by the goodness of God.

After that Elijah story the words of Paul to Timothy sound strangely modern and lovely. "I am fettered. God is not fettered." Strong Gospel, followed, as Paul frequently does, with his equally strong "therefore...." But wait. The Gospel gets even sweeter: "...if we are faithless (and who is not?), God remains faithful, for Christ cannot deny himself." That body of Christ imagery is more than mere imagery, it speaks of a very real connection between Christ and his church. That's who we are, remember?

The final verse of this second lesson gets used at ordinations and installations. Yours? Remember who said it? It is a beautiful and fitting blessing for one set apart to handle the Word of Truth.

With the reading of the Gospel we realize that this is an eleven leper Sunday. The first lesson gave us Elijah and one leper. The Gospel gives us Jesus and ten lepers. And there is an ecumenical lesson here because the only one who came back Jesus calls "a foreigner." Our batting average was one out of one with

Naaman when it came to thankfulness. Now that batting average gets blown away. It now stands at two out of eleven, perhaps a more accurate reading because of the larger sample size.

In the first verse of the Gospel, Jesus uses the faith word again. What is this? Commendation? "Good fellow, you have faith, so you get healed"? Shades of Oral Roberts! What can faith possibly mean in this context? Some see a connection here between faith and one's willingness to risk being made ashamed. If the ten had followed Jesus' instruction and no healing had happened, others in the leper community might well have chided them about their foolish naivete, or even their simple *dumheit* for ever having believed that a guy called Jesus from Nazareth could heal them. And they would have ended up chiding themselves, which is what happens when one is forced to acknowledge to oneself that one's foot has been in one's mouth or that the stuff on one's face is not makeup or a touch of cleansing cream but egg... breakfast!

Or is the foreigner's faith defined by the fact that he managed to take the small step requested of him by Jesus? Or, is this one fella's faith some kind of dim recognition on his part that this Jesus is no ordinary teaching-healing Rabbi, but none less than the promised Messiah? That's a pretty big stretch. Maybe we could settle for his faith being that Jesus is someone sent by God. The foreigner could be making the God connection.

But wait. Whatever faith means when Jesus says it here it surely means something strikingly different from all those old rules about food and tithe and clean and unclean and to whom one may speak and where one may pray. This much we can say, faith involves a perception on the foreigner's part of God's power as somehow personalized in Jesus, and his thankful return nails that divine healing power even tighter to Jesus. He didn't just get healed of his disease as did the other nine. The Samaritan discovered something new about God. Jesus' words about his faith deflect the Samaritan from becoming some kind of cheer leader for a Jesus cult and force him to discover his own, personal connection to God, the God who pays attention... even to lepers. Especially to lepers? Oh, my!

Pastoral Reflections

As much as we sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed as Sunday Schoolers when the Elijah stories came our way, just about that much we now tend to listen to them with more squinty eyes and pinched together lips. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," we say. "Uh huh. You bet!" That same hard-bitten mindset might lead some of us to wonder if only one of the ten came back to thank Jesus because he was the only one healed of the ten. Certainly an understandable thought for an inquiring mind. But there are better things to think about.

Did you notice how quick Elijah's king is to fear the worst when Naaman approaches? "It's a trick! Run for your lives! We will never get out of this one alive!" The king seems frankly paranoid. But Elijah is quietly confident, like one of the older ER docs, and says, "Get hold of yourself, your majesty. Just leave him to me. I'll see what I can do."

Then the real fun begins between Elijah and the little Candy Striper. Show me a modern general who would take that kind of insult. Most would drive away quickly as Naaman did and call in an air strike on the place, the kind that leaves only a smoking hole in the ground. Naaman's problem was that he came not as one seeking healing from God, but as a Syrian supreme commander, come to demand and pay for healing from a holy man with a big reputation. He was expecting a "big man to big man encounter," and he knew just how to make it work. Sending the Candy Striper succeeded in insulting the general, but notice what else it did. It kept Elijah out of the picture so that the general could see that it was

God, not Elijah who was doing this healing. The supreme commander met the supreme CPE supervisor who knew how to direct the focus to the Big Healer while keeping himself, the mere intermediary, out of sight.

Looks like a lesson for divine intermediaries might be brewing here. In case you didn't recognize the title, that's you, preacher, and any other Christian in the congregation who sees himself/herself as a person with a mission to the church and the world. And what is the lesson for divine intermediaries? Hide, baby, hide! Disappear. Give the glory to the One Who Is Glorious. There is a former parishioner from years ago who, each time we meet, reminds me that I am the one who baptized her son. It is nice to be remembered for one's mediation, but the important part of the baptism was not done by me. All I had was a little water and a few words. God did the baptism! All I did was the easy part, the part anybody could do. The mumbojumbo! I say again, God did the baptism, the rest of us watched. I have not yet learned how to hide so that the mother could see what was really going on when her son was baptized. I don't know how to disappear from the rail at Holy Communion either, but it might be easier, because many people shut their eyes as they commune. I pray that those closed eyes are finding the gracious heart of God the giver and not just a longer list of their own sins.

It is worth our while to examine both the process and the product for Naaman. Naaman's status and gifts were completely ignored. God's healing was not for sale any more than God's prophet was for sale. Everybody knows you don't wash away leprosy. No matter how many baths you take, no matter where you take them, leprosy is leprosy and can't be washed away. Naaman's conclusion was inescapable. This was more than the power of the river Jordan, more than the power of the holy man he had not seen. This was God, and Naaman had met him. For Naaman it was a god different from the gods he had known. This one did not respond to bribes or threats. This God gave, freely, without bargain or pressure. This God gave, not the way people give, but in the unique way God gives. Did you catch Elijah's message to preachers and to any other divine intermediaries? Go hide! As noted earlier, not an easy one to carry out, and to the extent that you succeed it will definitely mark you as countercultural.

Naaman came prepared to barter, to haggle, to hassle with the divine intermediary and finally to pay, dearly, for his healing. Poor Naaman did not get to do any of that because what he wanted was free. He came to drive a hard bargain and prided himself in his ability to do just that. Perhaps part of his pique was that he didn't even get a shot at it. With Naaman's new understanding of God, miracles are not for sale. Healing is not to be bargain shopped. You see, God gives! If you are finding easy parallels in today's Gospel, good for you. They are everywhere. Ten were healed. And for the one with sense enough to return to Jesus the payoff was far greater. He got better health, as did all ten, but he alone felt the new stirring in his heart which was the Holy Spirit. He alone had come to know the God of Elijah and Naaman, the unfettered, faithful God of Paul, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 24 October 18, 1998

Psalm 121
Genesis 32:22-31
2 Timothy 3:14-4:4
Luke 18:1-8

First Reading

Let's call this Sunday "Hangin' In There Sunday." Jacob hangs in there. Paul hangs in himself and tells Timothy to hang in, and Jesus tells a story about hanging in.

Back up a little bit and take them one at a time. The rascally Jacob, having colluded with his mother to trick poor old blind Isaac into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to his brother Esau, is returning home from exile (read: hiding), a rich man. He has two wives, 11 children, hosts of employees and large flocks and herds. He has good reason to fear his brother because most brothers don't easily get over the kind of shenanigans Jacob pulled. Add to Jacob's chicanery the tricks his uncle Laban pulled on Jacob, plus Rachel's bold theft of her father's household idols, and you have a first class dysfunctional extended family. The whole crowd deserves indictment! And in time it was going to get even worse. Remember what his big brothers did to Rachel's son, Joseph, the interpreter of dreams? Still think that Potiphar's wife made it all up? Ogden Nash said it well, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Or maybe God had something in mind with that choice.

Nevertheless, in today's episode, Jacob is returning home a prosperous, important man, one who is understandably fearful of his brother who approaches with his private militia. Jacob's strategy is sound. Send the animals and employees off in two companies. That way if Esau pounces on one, the second can cut and run. As a little insurance tell Esau that the animals are a present, a peace offering, if you will. Flocks and herds are expendable anyhow because Jacob was the kind of breeder who could get what he wanted from his animals.

Having set his plan in motion, Jacob pulls away from everyone and spends the night alone, wrestling with one who is simply called "a man." What do you think? Was his bad night because of something he ate, or because he was sleeping on the bare ground? Or, best theory yet, did his fearfulness awaken in him a long dormant conscience and did he, as they say, "get religion?" Or maybe it was all of the above. At any rate, Jacob struggled that night. Whether with a mysterious "man" or with an angel, or more easily believed, with himself, rocks and indigestion, out of that struggle came a resolve to serve God differently, better, more faithfully. It was a change reflected in his new name and marked by the limp of a man no longer young enough to sleep on the ground in comfort. Jacob chose to interpret it as a religious experience of the highest kind. "I have seen God's face (Peniel)," he says.

Next, more gentle words from Paul to Timothy. The apostle knew about itching ears. Do you? For our early ancestors hearing was a vital survival sense. Acute hearing could stir you from relaxation, rouse you from sleep, give you time to escape a predator or an enemy, or at least give you time to brace yourself for an impending attack. In order to protect this vital sense from injury, the ears became richly innervated with sensory nerves responsive to touch so that nothing foreign pokes in there or gets stuck there. Because of the density of these sensory nerves, when ears itch for any reason, they really itch. Also because of the structure of the ear, the more you scratch that itch, the better it feels and the stronger they itch. The same mechanism operates in a reaction to poison ivy. This little treatise on itching ears makes the apostle's metaphor all the more telling.

I'm sure you have seen people who have

the kind of itching ears the apostle is talking about, and you have noticed who attracts them. For a more complete catalogue see 3:2-8.

The remainder of this lesson is in need of exorcism for some people before it can be useful because it has been used as a major proof text by the theologians of biblical inerrancy and verbal inspiration. Some of us are wary of having this text smugly shoved at us, totally out of context. There, that should exorcise it. Now let's look at it.

Paul is connecting the Old Testament scripture with faith in Christ Jesus. This is good stuff. Look at what the Old Testament scripture is good for: teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness. Old Jacob and his clan gave us some pretty good lessons in living. But the Old Testament scripture must be seen "through faith in Christ Jesus," says Paul. Ya gotta know where the story is going or it makes no sense at all! This is the story of God at work among us. Otherwise the Old Testament is just stories about some frontier types with lots of bad habits. These terribly earthy, all too human people are the ones God chooses and then chooses to hang in there with. "How odd of God...."

Luke gives us another peek into Jesus' classes for his disciples. It is a story about hangin' in. There was this low life of a judge, see? I mean he didn't care about nothin' or nobody! This dude went to court each day because there he was god. He could do exactly as he wished and nobody could question him or correct him. It was beautiful. He abused equally the accused and their accusers, frightened juries, intimidated lawyers, and witnesses trembled when they entered his court room. He was so ugly all feared him, but nobody respected him.

A poor widow came to his court every day seeking justice. For the first three months he blew her away every day by saying, "Get out of here!" For the second three months he said, "Outa here!" For the third three months he just glowered at her and nodded toward the door. For the fourth three months he merely glowered. Then one day he got a little bit smart and said to himself, "This sorry woman bugs me. If I take care of her problem, maybe I will be rid of her forever." So he did, and he was. Jesus' point is, if persistence paid off with this scum-bag judge, how much more quickly will God hear those who pray persistently.

Then Jesus derails the whole story by asking if the Son of Man will find faith on earth when he comes. Right now the connection between the story of the judge and this question eludes me. Unless, that is, there is some kind of connection between persistence and faith..... Hoo Ha!

Pastoral Reflections

There is a discernible red thread running through these three lessons. Observe Jacob, returning in fear to his homeland, wrestling all night long to a new understanding of himself and God and a new name. Notice Paul with a stirring declaration of faith encouraging, almost demanding that Timothy keep on witnessing boldly to Jesus Christ. Next, Jesus tells us the story about the widow-who-never-gave-up. This Sunday is about hangin' in there like I said at the start. And Jesus' question about faith identifies a main ingredient necessary for hangin' in. Faith makes hangin' in possible!

But not just any hangin' in. Specifically, all three lessons are about hangin' in there with God. Jacob didn't let his opponent go. Paul sends his encouragement to Timothy from a prison with the words "fulfill *your* ministry." The widow got her justice, and God hears and delivers quicker than that rotten judge. Here's how it works. All Jacob's hangin' in, rascal that he was, could happen because God kept hangin' in with Jacob. God did not let Jacob go. And God kept hangin' in with Jacob's whole line. Check out the characters you can recognize in the genealogies of Jesus in Mat-

thew 1 and Luke 3. Not the most savory bunch. Paul could keep on hangin' in with his ministry, even while in prison, and could encourage Timothy to do the same because God was hangin' in with both of them. The importunate widow is fictional, but she comes to us from the lips of the best picture we will ever see of God hangin' in there for all of us. Do any of the people you preach to need to be encouraged to hang in there with God? Might they be encouraged mightily if told about God's hangin' in there for them? After all, it's Hangin' In There Sunday.

Pause now and follow the use of the word "faith" in Proper 22, 23 and 24. In Proper 22 Habakkuk says we must have faith to live, Paul attaches faith closely to God's Grace in Jesus Christ and Jesus blasts his disciples because they are so slow to catch on to the magnitude of what is happening right before them. Their faith is nowhere! They thought faith was about Jesus winning a couple scuffles with the Pharisees when the Pharisees weren't even the runner-up Junior High Class B team and Jesus was playing in the NBA. Proper 23 shows us Elijah and Naaman's battle over faith: Naaman wanted a deal, Elijah offered faith. Paul speaks tellingly of God's faithfulness even in the face of our faithlessness, and Jesus tells a man healed of leprosy that God offers a direct connection to all his children, a connection which Jesus calls faith. Today's lessons move us a little further along in our understanding of faith with the story of Jacob's hangin' in and Paul's hangin' in. Each is an act of faith. Each faith is based on God who was hangin' in with them. Luke gives us a story told by Jesus which is a beautiful example of hangin' in against impossible odds in order to show us a God who not only hangs in with us but a God who is quickly and powerfully responsive to all his children's needs. This cycle keeps on coming back to that, God's faithfulness to us. If you look closely you can see that we have been walking in a forest of faith. Each tree in this forest is made of Grace, also called God's faithfulness.

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25 October 25, 1998

Psalm 84:1-7
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22
or Sirach 35:12-17
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

First Reading

The text from Jeremiah lets us hear both sides of the dialogue between God and Israel. Dialogue is perhaps too mild a word for what is going on here. Tug-of-war better captures its character. Jeremiah minces no words about Israel's sin: "...our backslidings are many, we have sinned against you." Nor does God mince words: "This people have loved to wander. They have not restrained their feet." The prophet positions himself between Israel and God and speaks to both parties in the dispute. "Therefore the Lord does not accept them. He will remember their iniquity and punish their sins." The punishment, by the way, was a long disastrous drought that dried up all the streams and wells and parched the land. But the prophet addresses his plea to God. "Why? Why?" he asks, and then implores God, "do not abhor us, for thy name's sake, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory, break not thy covenant with us."

Of course, the people of Israel were hearing both sides of this verbal tug of war, which means that Israel too is reminded of God's choosing of Israel and of God's promises to Israel. Jeremiah does not preach only Law to them.

Today we are completing our four-part skip through 2 Timothy. Though Paul says

that he has been "...rescued from the lion's mouth," he reads the forces about him and accepts that "the time of my departure has come." His deliverance is real, but temporary, and he finds himself "already on the point of being sacrificed."

Consider the initial impact of these words on Timothy, his younger missionary companion. Might Timothy be inclined say, "No, no, no! We will move heaven and earth to rescue you. We will send messengers and arrange to pay any fines or bribes to secure your freedom. We'll get you out of there. We must! The future of the church depends on it!" Then consider the even more powerful second impact of Paul's words on Timothy. Paul is not fearful for himself or for the future of the church. He is ready to declare his death a sacrifice, an offering to God, freely given. The future of the church is in God's hands and we can rest easy about it. There are strong lessons in the power of the gospel here for Timothy's instruction, and for ours.

Typically Paul, he leaves this lofty plane and descends quickly to the mundane. "Bring my cloak and books and especially the parchments," all things needed for his continued missionary work. Talk about a man on a mission!

The Pharisee and the Publican story is older than A Mighty Fortress for most of us Lutherans and contains no surprises, having been well mined all our lives by preachers and teachers. However, it could be brightened and freshened and given a new luster by adding a few details that Luke omitted. Why not give your middle-aged Pharisee a name, Eliezer or Nadab or some such? Let him awaken as the morning sun warms his middle-aged bones in the spacious sleeping room of his well-appointed Jerusalem town house. He feels just the slightest twinge of lower back pain as he eases from his king-size bed. His first thoughts are about his breakfast, "not that health food cereal again," and of his morning paper, "not puppy chewed again," and of his late afternoon meeting with the Temple Security Committee, "not all that hype about the Rabbi from Nazareth again." He wonders if the meeting will end soon enough for him to squeeze in his daily prayers before dinner. He worries a bit about the calculations of his many tithes, should he increase? "Well, next month will be soon enough." Paint him as self absorbed and vain as you wish as he rearranges his thinning hair and sadly pats his growing paunch, dismissing a program of more stringent fasting, "might not be healthy at my age."

Your Publican awakens on the same morning in far humbler circumstances in the middle class section of Jerusalem. Call him Ben something-or-another. It has a nice ring to it. He also anticipates his day, but with no relish. He has planned a visit to six shepherd families for the morning. These thieves transfer sheep back and forth with their neighbors, so you never get a good count of their flock unless you surprise them and count all the sheep in one village at one time. That tactic, invented by him, usually works and gets you an accurate sheep count and some surly shepherds to deal with about the taxes they owe. Oh, and this is summertime. Remember how those guys smell in the summertime? After a modest lunch near the gate our Publican plans to visit that big wine merchant in the old city. The guy is rolling in dough, but is such a clever liar! He deserves to be gouged, especially after he offers his usual paltry bribe.

Following these two business calls our Publican must hurry to the temple to try to work on his bad conscience which has been making sleep difficult and fitful in recent months. "Can a bad conscience also give you heartburn? All day long?" He decides to skip breakfast to see if that helps.

By the time the two men stand near each other in the temple, the Pharisee had found his breakfast pleasing, his paper unchewed and his meeting with the Security Committee

quickly over. Some people higher up have a solution for the Rabbi from Nazareth. Our Pharisee's prayers can be expected to be the usual self-satisfied ones again. The Publican, on the other hand, had a terrible day. Three of the shepherd families still had their flocks out in the field, and he spent the morning racing from one to another and dealing with fleet footed, dissembling, teenaged shepherds. Talk about heartburn! So bad, he skipped lunch too. His afternoon was spent in a dark wine cellar with a flickering lantern, trying to count dust covered barrels of wine which the wine merchant kept pounding with his ham-sized hand to prove they were empty. They weren't, and the dust he raised by his pounding would have choked a horse! Our Publican is exhausted, dirty, and still coughing. But he has had a major change of heart and prays the prayer Jesus quotes.

"*Justified!* rather than the other." Spoken by the one who knew the full glory of God's mercy and had already made a down payment on it.

Pastoral Reflections

Today is "Stretch Grace Sunday." Jeremiah's tug-of-war between Israel and God is typical Jeremiah, but also typically Lutheran. The word "Why?" is the giveaway. It is not a whining, crybaby "Why?" It is the "Why?" of faith that is being sorely tested, but faith with a vision of God that still needs to grow, faith that looks to God (papa) to fix things. The needed growth can be seen in the Publican's faith which finds a God of genuine Grace in the middle of things that still need a lot of fixing. Things can be fixed and will be fixed by the person praying, they will not be fixed magically by divine intervention. Your task, dear preacher, is getting this vastly larger, more transcendent vision of God across to people who still want to see Jesus as their problem-solving-good-ol'-buddy-who-never-lets-them-down. We know the Publican's professional life is a mess. What goes with the tax collector territory is a constant loud harangue and cheating and chiseling and name calling on both sides and frequent attempts to bribe, some tempting, some not. It is the way the taxation system worked—and 2,000 years have not brought much improvement. All those things still need fixing when the Publican leaves the temple, "justified." But, propelled by a new Spirit, he will strive to fix what he can. And he will continue to need Grace as he needs air and water and food and rest. Grace defines his relationship with God, even when he gets his whole life fixed, which is not likely.

This is "Stretch Grace Sunday." Jeremiah begs God to stretch Grace to include Israel one more time. Paul shows us how one is moved when living with a stretchable Grace. And Jesus stretches Grace to include the despised Publican "rather than the other."

Let me show you how far the Grace can be stretched. There is a clue in the Pharisee's prayer. Let's call what the Pharisee does the Automatic Mental Comparison (AMC). It is so common a human trait that everybody does it, automatically, even you and I. When meeting someone new, we automatically measure ourselves against that person, and we do it in such a way that we come off better. "He may be younger and sharp, but he still has so much to learn." "She may have more to spend on her wardrobe, but at least my posture is better, and always will be." "He may have advanced degrees, but listen to that accent!" "She plays a good game of tennis, but I would just love to see what would happen to her on water skis." If any of these AMCs sound remotely similar to the monologue you have within yourself, you catch my drift. So far AMC sounds fairly innocent, merely a somewhat questionable way of boosting a slightly sagging self-esteem. A closer inspection will reveal that AMC is what makes stereotypes and prejudices so powerful. We don't even have to think about it, it's automatic! This is not trivial

behavior.

For the Pharisee, AMC is a prayer form. Which of us has not caught him/herself secretly saying, "Thank God I am not the kind of mess that she/he is!" The second half of the sentence usually never gets said. The second half is: "But, God, what are we going to do about the kind of mess I am? The first half of the sentence makes us feel so good we just stop and call it a day. Adding the second half puts us with the Publican. Where the Pharisee belonged. Where we all belong. Grace can stretch to anyone who gets to the second half of the sentence. Some people call it repentance.

Of course, when you and I run our little AMC machines it is not a prayer. We don't ask God to approve of our AMC, we just do it for our own benefit, and it does feel good, doesn't it? In fact, God is not even part of it. Whoops! Now who needs to stretch Grace? Anybody you know?

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 26 November 1, 1998

Psalm 32:1-7
Isaiah 1:10-18
2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12
Luke 19: 1-10

First Reading

The lesson from Isaiah, chapter 1, begins at a roar and goes right on roaring until he has delivered a full catalogue of Yahweh's displeasure with Israel, covering everything from their bloody smoking sacrifices to their callous disregard of social justice.

Listen to the roar as each treasured temple practice is smashed to pieces and swept aside. Sacrifices, burnt offerings, sprinkling of blood, pilgrimages, incense, holy days, assemblies, feast days, prayers. Each of these is a solid prop for Israel's feeling of cozy security with the Almighty One. Then on to the moral charges: corruption, uncleanness, evil, oppression, no care for widows and orphans. Each of these would sting like acid poured in the wounds left by the flogging of their temple ritual practices.

After seven pounding verses of pure Law comes the sweet, soft offer of reprieve: "Come... though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow...." The Law is clear, detailed. He tells it as it is. The reprieve is impossible; everybody knows scarlet never gets white again. But with God...? The offer is winsome, a loving parent, harshly announcing displeasure, then gently calling erring children home to dinner. The offer is Radical Grace!

After all that roaring, Paul sounds beautifully benign. "We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, as is fitting...." If you are male and have been watching too many action movies you may find yourself wanting more Isaiahian thunder after Paul's soft and gracious words, but wait. There is a problem to be addressed in the congregation of the Thessalonians. Some have been stirring up trouble by announcing the coming of the day of the Lord. If you give careful attention, you can almost see the tent and the folding chairs and the sweaty preacher, microphone in hand, and hear him say, "Ohhhhh, Sister! Oh, Brother! I-tell-you-it-is-*true*! Come with me to the mountain top to wait! Tomorrow may be too late! You don't have to go to work tomorrow! Tomorrow may be the day!" Paul's more steady eschatology knows the day is coming, but is not cause for neglecting one's duties to family and community.

The contrast between the first two lessons sets us up perfectly for the Zacchaeus story because the Zacchaeus story is a story of radical, even incredible Grace (did I really say that?).

Many of us have known the Zacchaeus story since we were little kids. You might even know the song they teach the youngest class, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he...." Our long association with the wee little man means that we preachers are going to have to put a new shine on the story if we expect people to listen. Luke tells us he was a short guy, altitudinally challenged. Fill that out a bit. Five feet two inches would be about right, but stocky. Built, you might say, a guy who pumps iron, with a fringe of dark reddish curls about his freckled pate and an even darker, curly beard. He has quick darting eye movements and the quick head and forearm movements of a man with a lot of energy and a lot on his mind. He would make a deadly racquetball player with all that muscle and quickness. Got the picture? The kind of small, in-shape, 30-something man who could overcome his small stature by quickly hoisting his strong body up a tree to see what he wanted to see. By the way, he wears slacks and a sports jacket by Armani. The dude is no slouch.

He knew something about Jesus. That's why he climbed the tree for a better look. His attraction is easy to figure out. The Pharisees gave the tax collectors a very hard way to go, called them traitors, the scum of the earth, no longer Israelites with whom they could associate. Pharisees were not above looking down their long noses and hissing "sssssinner" when a tax collector got near enough to hear. Zacchaeus had been scorned by these haughty religious people ever since he first took the job of collecting taxes for the Romans. When he was still in training they sent a delegation to try to talk him out of it, but Zacchaeus had children to feed and no inheritance from his father and could see no other way for him to go without a drastic reduction in standard of living. So he stayed in the business and endured their scorn. He had even been spat upon, more than once. It was easy to do, given his short stature. Zacchaeus handled the Pharisees' scorn by returning it. He knew how they responded when it was their turn to pay Roman taxes. He had seen their scheming duplicity, their cleverly worded, insulting bribes. Who were these hypocrites to call him unclean, to put him on the level with prostitutes? Oh, by the way, I think Zacchaeus needs a gold pinkie ring and a few gold chains about his neck.

Zacchaeus had no doubt been within hearing when Jesus landed a few good zingers on the Pharisees. Jesus did that regularly, you know. The Jerusalem sector tax collectors probably talked about him at their weekly staff meetings. Zacchaeus heard Jesus do it once, a second time, again, and again. It was true! This country Rabbi called those Pharisees on their sanctimonious puffery! How fine! After that, Zacchaeus tried to keep track of Jesus, so he could listen briefly during his lunch hour. There he was in Jericho! Surrounded by the usual crowd. Zacchaeus had never really had a good look at him, so he climbed a tree for a better look.

To Zacchaeus' considerable surprise Jesus stopped the crowd, called him by name and invited himself to lunch at his house. Zacchaeus was high enough up the tax collector ladder to be known by name and by sight. The crowd stopped following as the two went off to the tax collector's mansion. The crowd stopped following and started murmuring. You remember murmuring: you put one hand beneath your nose and say whatever unspeakable thing you want to say. If anybody looks at you, just begin coughing. It is a way to express yourself without taking chances. I think I know which stately guys in this crowd started the murmuring.

If we only had a record of what transpired in Zacchaeus' dining room, people who do pastoral care might have a better idea of how to confront. What Jesus managed to do over lunch was to turn an adoring groupie, who loved him for all the wrong reasons, into a repentant sinner who received the assurance

of the forgiveness of his sins and showed a heart ready to make extravagant amends. What a story of Grace bestowed in secret! Too bad we will never know how he did it. Nevertheless, if you are looking for a story of radical Grace and its effects, the story of the Rabbi and the tax collector is a winner.

Pastoral Reflections

We don't know what happened behind Zacchaeus' closed door, but we do know something. And what we know is worth noticing. Jesus did not hesitate to move toward the rich man in the tree. Jesus was not put off by his wealth, or by his occupation, or by the disdain showered on him by his fellow Israelites. Furthermore, do you suspect for even a moment that Jesus did not know why Zacchaeus was so interested in him? Jesus was not ever put off by people's less-than-worthy motivations for interest in him, and you yourself can probably personally testify to the fact that there has been no change in that.

Notice also how Jesus moves toward Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus knew that good religious people did not go to tax collectors' houses, nor did they eat with them. Israelites had this contagion theory about how evil rubs off from one person to another, and they did not want to get any tax collector stuff on themselves, no, sir! When Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house he broke that big rule! Jesus was extending Zacchaeus a hospitality that no one was supposed to dream of extending to a tax collector. It would be like you going to lunch with a Grand Imperial Wizard of the KKK. You'd better have a good story about evangelism outreach or they will even kick you out of the Rotary! This is not feeble Grace, or even stretched Grace. To Zacchaeus this is Radical Grace!

So Jesus started the encounter by putting himself in jeopardy, by breaking the social code which excluded tax collectors from polite society. This student of human behavior believes that Jesus' action read loud and clear as INCLUSION to Zacchaeus, way louder and clearer even than it did to those who murmured, who also got the message. This inclusion was a grace no one else extended to Zacchaeus or to his family. Can you imagine what it was like being a chief tax collector's kid at the Jericho Hebrew School? Can you imagine how Jesus' presence in Zacchaeus' house made his heart soar? Even if this Nazarene Rabbi was a bit controversial and a bit scruffy around the edges, this was a Rabbi! with disciples! and a following! a *real* Rabbi! Radical!

Now that we have Zacchaeus finding Grace in Jesus' mere presence in his house, maybe Jesus had no secret method after all. The last two sentences of today's Gospel may give us all we need to know about the conversation in Zacchaeus' house. "Today salvation has come to this house, since Zacchaeus also is a child of Abraham." Zacchaeus *was* included in the house of Israel! And here was how it happened: "For the Man of Heaven came to seek and to save the lost." Zacchaeus was delighted to number himself among the lost for whom the Man of Heaven came. Grace is recognizable as Grace, even if it comes from a man who would never have an Armani suit. Suddenly Zacchaeus is no longer proud of his house and his wardrobe. He needs to give something back. He needs to unload. What got to him was a Grace-Law-Grace approach, not unlike the one we noticed earlier in Isaiah, who also offers Grace before there has been any noticeable repentance on the part of Israel. Radical Grace is what brings them in! But you knew that.

Got any folks in need of that in front of you on Sunday? Sure you do. Got any evangelists ready to put themselves in jeopardy just by being there? You know you do! Does your community contain any social pariahs who would be graced by mere churchly inclusion? I'll let you figure that one out.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 27 November 8, 1998

Psalm 17:1-9
Job 19:23-27a
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17
Luke 20:27-38

First Reading

Why do bad things happen to good people? The question always hooks us, and there are some answers in the book of Job. Job's friends, who might make good Lutherans, given their keen understanding of the dynamics of human guilt, tell Job that bad things happen to good people because the good people are not really, that is genuinely, good. In the process they manage to catalogue with dreary completeness every twist and turn of the guilty human heart. We've all heard that answer before.

A second quick answer to our question lies in the opening drama between God and Satan. Bad things happen to good people because God is capricious and makes book with Satan on Job's response to disaster. This answer turns faith to ashes and demolishes both providence and Grace, leaving God with only power.

The section of Job we read for today is part of his answer to his friend Bildad who has been telling him that he is not only wicked, but that he does not know God. Hear Job's words in our text as a moan of the deepest, soul-wrenching anguish. He pleads with his friends for pity and launches into his surprising hymn of faith in God's righteousness and faithfulness. This is the text made famous by Handel in his "Messiah." Unfortunately, George was not the best exegete.

Many of us have more trouble than Handel did in calling this passage in Job a statement of faith in the resurrection of the body. After a few readings it seems to many to be a statement of Job's faith that God will vindicate him, not raise him from the dead. Be that as it may, coming from the depths of Job's misery, a misery compounded by his friends and their efforts at inducing guilt, the power of his statement of faith is still both astonishing and strong. I read a long pause between v. 22 and v. 23 during which Job turns inward, gathering strength from the Spirit of God.

All these murky Jobian meanderings concerning Truth or Consequences are echoed in Paul's opening words, but they fade quickly in the wonderful clarity of Grace "because God chose you from the beginning to be saved" in verse ten. In concert with Job, Paul sounds heroic. His words are bracing. "So," Paul concludes, "there is no problem here. Stand firm!" Faith pushed up against the wall really can be that simple.

The Sadducees, a clever lot, know how to frame a question to catch a guy. They had been hanging around all morning with nothing to do. They had told jokes a while, then they had a spitting contest, and in between those fun things they had sharpened their rhetorical skills by inventing trick questions. The game they loved to play is called "I gotcha!" and is widely played by smart alecks everywhere. It was the Sadducees' religious duty to take pot shots at the idea of resurrection, and it was so easy. After all, a bodily resurrection of the dead also raises enormous unanswered questions about crowding and housing and food supply and sanitation, not to mention family responsibilities. "What say we have some fun quizzing this rube Rabbi from Nazareth and watch him put his foot in his mouth? We can probably trip him up with the old seven brothers routine. Who wants to go first?" Snicker, snicker.

Jesus does not disparage them or their clumsy question. He answers their question with authority and backs it up with an invincible reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Sadducees wouldn't dare touch that big

three and turned to skulk away muttering.

What the Sadducees had tried to do was fit God into a box of their making. "Of course," they reassured each other, "God could not raise the dead. Nobody could do that. Nobody." So they began with that premise and constructed situations where a resurrection would cause confusion were it to happen to humans. There was nothing wrong with the human problems they presented. These scoffers made their mistake earlier, in their premise that would have severely limited God. Actually, answering their question and mowing down their premise would not be difficult for any student of the Old Testament, which reveals a God much bigger than the puny guy the Sadducees had in mind. Interestingly enough, Job teaches the same lesson and so does Paul.

Pastoral Reflections

This is "Grace and the Bean Counters Sunday." Preacher, beware of the many attractive possibilities of Job-inspired homiletic wanderings! The preacher's fine skill and great wisdom can appear to penetrate the deep mysteries of good and evil. So tempting! But our job is to preach the gospel.

A better way. Touch Job lightly, raise the big questions if you must. They may draw a few of your listeners, but then move to better, more cogent issues like the God to whom all are alive. Today's message shows us the struggle between God and the Bean Counters. Yes! Job's friends are excellent examples of bean counters. Two characteristics distinguish them. They wanted to make sure no failing went unnoticed or unpunished, which sounds like a task for someone considerably more godlike than they appeared to be. I know you have seen those kinds of theologians. They want to find a hard-wired connection between a person's favor with God and that person's financial or business success. And it drives them to an endless counting of beans. If you prosper in any way, it is a sign of God's favor. If you have any trouble, it is a sign of God's disfavor. To bean counters, transactions with God are exactly the same as transactions with people, only maybe a little larger. You get exactly what you pay for, not a nickel more. Job's truth is that while the whole world is made up of bean counters, God is not a bean counter! In fact, God is so far from being a bean counter that it astonishes God when we keep on making a big deal about counting beans, either our own or other people's. Does this sound as though Job knows a bigger God?

Paul gives a look at life beyond bean counting, a world in which our hearts can be established in every good work and word. Paul's product is called Grace.

The Sadducees were seriously into bean counting. They had God in such a tiny box of theirs that God could not do anything, not even raise the dead! Their small, helpless God could be put to flight, they thought, with some simple trick questions. Of course, they were bean counter questions, which made it easy for Jesus to blow them away. So we, all of us, struggle with a God too small, a bean counter kind of God whom we need to discard for the God who is God.

God is the God who gave life to this small blue planet, but not just the threescore and ten or fourscore kind of life. Let me show you the kind of mess in which we find ourselves.

God gives life, but we live in a society dogged by death and thoroughly fascinated by death. That dogged fascination fosters bean counting. This is an area in which the church can and must be vibrantly and refreshingly counter-cultural. How many people got wasted on TV fiction last night? The count is awesome, but it never matches the body count on the ten o'clock news, and those are not fiction. The amount of money made by the movie Titanic will set a record that may stand for a while. I heard of a woman who saw it 14 times! Sure, the movie makers turned this woeful disaster into some kind of fictional love story,

but the fundamental story of the great ship is a story about the connection between human hubris and death. Probably an unsinkable story. We bean counters are mesmerized by death. How close can we get to death and still walk away? Can we feel the emotion of the doomed and still survive? Wheee! Exciting!

Or check out the demands we put on health service providers. Part of the demand comes from the fact that nobody wants to be sick, but my guess is that a substantial part of the pressure comes from the fact that nobody wants to be either old or dead. Even when we are dead, we refuse to allow ourselves to look dead. That need has spawned a vast nation-wide industry that is increasingly ripping off grief-stricken people. Is it fear of death or fear of not having taken care of everything in advance? Does dying suggest some kind of failure on the part of the person dying? Who has not seen people embarrassed to be dying? Is this bean counting or what?

On the other hand, God is about life. Paul's words for today speak of the "eternal comfort of God and good hope through Grace." Some of the power of this comfort from God lies in the fact that God is not a bean counter. Grace is the key word. The Grace of God is made much clearer by Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the whole package, the done deal, the wrapped up, finished product, sealed and tied with a red ribbon, and totally yours in your Baptism. Everything from the generations of promises to the Annunciation, to Bethlehem, to Gethsemane, to Golgotha, to Pentecost. We are talking life here: the God of the living! The God to whom all keep right on living the way Abraham and Isaac and Jacob did.

In the contest between Grace and the Bean counters, Grace always wins. It's God's way!

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 28 November 15, 1998

Psalm 98
Malachi 4:1-2a
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

First Reading

The strong eschatological theme of today's lessons jumps at us. It begins in Malachi's scary then beautiful poem and carries through all the way to then end of the Gospel. Eschatology somehow got a lot more believable with the advent of the thermonuclear bomb. I guess each advance in human weaponry brought new appreciation for eschatology. Our increasing explorations in space also make some of these ancient eschatological writings appear more likely. Science and technology seems to be combining to put us humanoids into a more and more insignificant corner of the cosmos. We are beginning to understand our infinitesimal size on the grand scale of what is out there, so that ought to make it easier to preach an eschatological sermon, right?

Malachi has been arguing for a God who notices and remembers those who follow God's way and those who do not. The distinction between righteousness and evil is never forgotten by God. To bolster his argument he speaks of a great and final burning. "Burning like an oven," he says. Open the door on your air-tight wood stove when you have a stack temperature of about 300 degrees F. and see the sparks fly out as new oxygen gets to the overheated embers. The whole inside of the stove glows golden with heat, and if you get too close the radiant heat singes the hair on your hands and face. Imagine a handful of stubble, pieces of dry straw, tossed in there. They wouldn't even land, being consumed in mid-air, leaving not even a puff of smoke in

their instantaneous combustion. Well, that handful of straw is the arrogant and all evildoers. Stubble has way less than the proverbial snowball's chance in that fire. They will have neither root nor branch, no past and no future. So far Malachi's poetry is vivid, but fearsome.

Then comes the sweet part. For the others "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in his wings." No roaring fire of utter destruction for them. Instead, a new sun will rise, promising a new day with its bright, healing rays. But this is not the earthly sun that rises and then sets, but the sun of righteousness which never sets. Observe the contrast. A destructive, all-consuming fire on the one hand. Poof, you're gone! On the other hand a beneficent, healing, hope-filled, warming, permanent sun, which causes righteousness to flourish. Glow, you're holy!

The apostle has the tough task of straightening out those who were declaring a brief, penultimate vacation because the parousia is coming. These fellas had appeared in the Thessalonian congregation preaching the popular but disturbing doctrine that since the end was at hand, why not kick back and wait for it? What sense did all this work and worry about daily bread make? What happened is, some in the congregation found them persuasive and others found themselves paying for these prophets of relaxation and their at-ease followers. They couldn't let them go hungry, could they? Can you imagine the factions and the friction such a group could produce? Paul is clear: "no work, no food," and gives the opponents of welfare some strong scripture to use if they carefully avoid the context in which it appears.

Paul's last two sentences sound so pastoral. "We command and exhort such persons in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living." But, you see, there still were widows and others who needed the loving support of the congregation, so he must add, "...do not be weary in well-doing." It seems that he feared that the Thessalonian congregation, having slid off on one side by feeding those who would not work, might now slide off on the other side and offer their support to no one. If this sounds like a part of the ongoing arguments about welfare I guess that is because it is.

The Gospel, though scary to some, gives us another look at the magnitude and power of God's Grace. If you listen carefully, you can almost hear the disciples' conversation. These simple former fishermen from Galilee are always too impressed by the grandeur of the temple in Jerusalem. Prideful nationalistic feelings begin to stir in their hearts as their eyes, adoring, skim its great walls and doorways. "How wonderful to be among God's chosen people!" they say. "How fine to revel in the glories of our nation. Isn't it grand to be in the Holy City and in this holiest of places in the Holy City?" they say. "We don't ever want to leave this place! And our Rabbi, the wise Jesus of Nazareth, has brought us here. How blessed is he!" Can you see their heads wagging in self-satisfaction?

Jesus can't help hearing this, and their words jolt his awareness of how far off the mark they are. Their time with him, all their lessons and discussions, all his parables have not brought one candle's worth of light to these men. Maybe a few shock treatments will get them moving.

Shock one. "You like this pile of rocks?" says he. "You really like it a lot? Let me tell you about it. The whole thing will be knocked down. Leveled! Not one stone left on top of another! Now how do you like your temple? Still think it's wonderful? Still ga-ga over these stones? Let me tell you, it's nothin'! People built it to remind themselves of God's greatness. But it is not God, you boneheads!"

At first they think he is kidding, and their half smiles and polite student-like questions about the timing of this destruction tell him they are waiting for some kind of punch line,

so he shouts out shock two. "Don't be such empty headed fools! People will try their best to trick you. Don't let it happen! Don't you dare follow false leaders!"

Then in a softer, teacher's voice he delivers shock three. "Wars like you never imagined, earthquakes, starving people, plagues, terrors in space. All these will happen!" Blank looks.

Shock four, delivered by the teacher again, the one with the steady, level gaze. "Before all that, you will be persecuted, betrayed, unable to find justice anywhere, unable to trust even family, you will be hated and killed because you are trusting in me." Still blank.

Then comes the final shock for them in this series of shocks. When all human values have been obliterated, when the earth itself is shaking to pieces and fire rains from the sky... "Don't you worry about it! Not a hair of your head will perish." Somehow, in the midst of this cosmic cataclysmic nightmare, they are to be spared. Jesus moved quickly from a depiction of the destruction of the temple to the destruction of the world to the magnitude of God's Grace, shown here in God's ability to hold them and keep them from destruction. I'm sure shock five left the twelve slack-jawed and bug-eyed with minds blown, to a man.

Eschatology scares lots of people even today. They would rather not hear about it, partially because it is so scary and partly because it sounds so much like the evening news on TV without the relief provided by commercials.

But wait a minute. Those people believe eschatology is about fear, but Jesus' eschatology is about Grace, and those of us who know Jesus can find our way through his eschatology to Grace. Take one little piece of Jesus' eschatology. "Not a hair of your head will perish," he says. Message? Get a glimpse of the God who is bigger than a temple which you know will fall, bigger than human loyalty, which you know erodes, bigger than the human family, which you know can turn on its own, bigger than human justice, so easily corrupted. Get a glimpse of the God who is bigger than the earth, which you know must end, bigger than the cosmos, because God created the cosmos. Get a glimpse of this bigger God and know that God values you, right down to each hair on your fuzzy head. How's that for gospel? Jesus propels us into discovering a larger God!

The misguided Christians who decided to kick back, mooch off the congregation and wait for the parousia seem almost trivial, but they need Paul to fuss at them, and they show us one brand of false teachers not to follow.

Malachi on the other hand has great poetic words for you: "sun of righteousness with healing in his wings." Don't preach your sermon without them.

Pastoral Reflections

This is "Measuring Grace Sunday." First look at the problem. We all loved the little town my mother put out on the buffet at Christmas, but something about it bothered me. It had proportional problems no one else seemed to notice. The houses were about right for the size of the trees. The little mirror for a pond was also an appropriate size for the houses and trees. But the cars were bigger than the houses and the people were absolute giants and would never fit inside the cars or the houses. It was a problem of proportion, of relative magnitude, of scale. The reindeer were four people high!

Many of us have a proportional problem when we think about God. Let's go to work on measuring God and on measuring Grace. Think of the biggest set of lights you ever saw, the ones for night baseball. Those lights can turn night to day at the flick of a switch. If you look into them you will see spots for a while. Next think of the whole ball field in darkness, overcast sky, no moon, just one paper match lit out in center field. One match. Then flip on all the lights again. Did you catch the difference?

The magnitude of light went from very large to very small, minuscule, back to very large.

That difference in light magnitude is larger than many people's idea of the difference between themselves and God. Yet that light difference, big as it may seem, is small compared to the real difference between our magnitude and God's magnitude.

Now add Grace to the picture. The big surprise about God is that God is gracious. God gives God away, freely, to the likes of us. Jesus told us again and again that God loves us. Yeah, us! And wants to preserve every single hair we have on our heads. So how big do you imagine God's Grace to be? Big enough to come through for us in the final cataclysm? Naah. But that's what this lesson says, and people need to hear about it, don't you think? Even the ones with their tiny picture of God. Perhaps they need it most.

Christ the King
November 22, 1998

Psalm 46
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

First Reading

It's a roller coaster ride, these lessons for Christ the King Sunday. We begin at the low of Jeremiah's woes to the false shepherds of Israel, then soar to the high of the promise of the righteous Branch, a new king named "The Lord Is Our Righteousness"! From there we go even higher to try to reach St. Paul in Colossians. The apostle is fighting no one, nor is he trying to thrash through any gnarly pastoral problems here. This is Paul at his most magnificent, penning pure praise of Christ in what is arguably the highest Christological expression in the New Testament. Being Paul, he must end at the cross, but after such a burst of praise the cross sounds more like a Pauline signature than a theological footnote.

With the Gospel the ride starts low all over again and stays there with Luke's curiously spare account of the crucifixion of Jesus and the two thugs. The unadorned writing style in verses 33-34 sounds like the humdrum, page 5 account of some kid's bicycle stolen on Elm Street. Ponder this: Luke, who wrote such a wondrously melodic and compelling account of the nativity, goes stark and flat when writing of the crucifixion.

Two themes color this narration by Luke. First we have two kinds of cruelty: the spiteful, venomous cruelty of those who engineered this crucifixion on the one hand, and the senseless cruelty of those who carried it out on the other. It takes a deep-seated, grinding hatred to mock a man who has just been crucified. Could you do it? In our day one gets repeated TV coverage for that kind of durable enmity. Just yesterday my TV showed me several times the face of a man with that kind of hatred. His wife had been brutally murdered some years ago by a young woman high on chemicals and defiance. That young woman was about to be executed for her crime and the man couldn't wait. He anticipated her death the way a gambler anticipates winning. He salivated the way an addicted person salivates for alcohol. He was breathless, longing for her death the way a heroin addict is breathless for a fix. His hatred seems to approach the livid, writhing hatred Jesus' enemies felt toward him.

For the soldiers who carried out the crucifixion it is a chilly, disinterested hatred that just does-not-give-a-damn for anything or anybody. "The sergeant said, 'You guys muck out the governor's stables or do the crucifixion.' We chose the crucifixion. It's easier. Mucking out the stables usually makes our shoulders sore the next day. Big deal." So they pounded the nails through living flesh

into wood, attached the little sign, hoisted the cross and dropped it into its socket. Then they yawned, stretched, and sat down to wait for this alleged King of the Jews to die. To the representatives of Imperial Rome this one deserved only a little taunting with vinegar and some passing verbal ridicule. They had heard of this one. One set of Roman military shoulders had already been made sore on their poor buddy who had been assigned to flog this one.

The other theme comes from the actions of Jesus and shows us Grace. His compassion is not squelched by their hot and cold hatred or by his own agony. He prays for those who have only contempt for him, for those who delight in his misery and long for his death. He also prays for the ones who, with their humanity in neutral, hammer the spikes, the ones who show no interest in the wrenching groans forced from the man they crucify. Their interest is locked in their own relative comfort and ease.

The small drama between Dismas and Jesus starts with the other thug who joins Jesus' enemies in their mockery. Here is a man so devoid of human feeling that he, himself crucified and dying, mocks the man who is crucified and dying next to him. From what I know of death row inmates, a kinship develops among many of them as they wait for the end of their legal maneuverings and death. They pray for each other, encourage each other, even do jail house lawyering for each other and mark with respectful silence the execution of one of their number. Dismas musters the strength to scold this wretch, and Jesus promises paradise to Dismas.

Interestingly, our Gospel does not take us all the way to the end of that day. You know how the story ends. Jesus dies there, unattended except by the soldiers whose last attention is a spear shoved between his ribs. His limp body is taken down and laid in a tomb before the sun goes down that Friday evening. But our Gospel ends before that, leaving him barely alive, hanging there, waiting to die from loss of blood or loss of breathing. We are left with this utterly hopeless vision of Christ the King. We are left without closure. There is no way off that cross except to die. Those who had been hoping for a last minute judicial or rebellious or angelic reprieve have just run out of hope. The party is over. Time to go home.

Pastoral Reflections

Surely somebody will want to back up to the Jesus-Dismas exchange to fire some pointed questions. "How *could* he do that?" they want to know. "Paradise is a pretty big payoff for one puny verbal defense against a helpless scoffer. Besides, it didn't change a single solitary thing! What's more, Dismas was never baptized, never went to one single confirmation class, and certainly was never confirmed. Why, he not only never made a financial pledge, he never even had any envelopes! How could Jesus promise him paradise? This doesn't seem right to me!"

Our poor questioner has showed his hand. This is bean counter thinking! The question is more protest than question, and before it has fully passed the lips, the speaker must realize that he has just put himself in the position of the Elder Brother, a venerable bean counter, which probably takes some of the wind out of his sails. Our problem is, of course, that this crucifixion scene, like every other scene in Jesus' life, is a human drama in which Grace is powerfully operative. How could Jesus do this for Dismas? It's called Grace! It's the same way Jesus deals with...you! And... me! Each of us!

The clean slate! The second chance! Or third, or four hundred ninety first (that's seventy times seven plus one) chance. It's the new order, the kingdom of God. The bonus you always knew you needed, but could never earn.

Having seen Grace in this gruesome scene we are ready to join St. Paul in his Christic

rhapsody in Colossians. Read it again now and see if it sings any better for you having visited Golgotha. The compilers of our lessons made no mistake by choosing this simple crucifixion account in Luke, nor was it by mistake that they left the story unfinished. The crucifixion ended. We know how it ended. We know about burial and resurrection and Pentecost and 2,000 years of telling the story. But if you want to see Grace Delivered, if you want to see Christ the King, look there, on the cross. It is not that this single event in the life of Jesus made all the difference. It is his very being that makes the difference. But this one event, his crucifixion, the event in which he shares our human death, gives new strength to all the other events of his life. This cross allows us to hear and to understand and to make the vital connection between sacrifice and love, the unqualified love of God, also called Grace. In short, the cross lets us see clearly how Grace gets delivered. This crucifixion scene is so wretched because sin is so wretched, because fallen humanity is so slyly perverse, so twisted, so deceitful. It's all there in one picture.

So in thousands of churches and on thousands of steeples there are many thousands of crosses lifted up for all to see. And millions of knees in all the colors that humanity comes in bend before Christ the King whose highest throne is a cross. A fitting finale for our church year: Grace Delivered.

With the cross thus lifted high for all to see, it is a fitting time for a review of the liturgical year correlated with a review of the events and actions of Grace within the parish. Have there been births and baptisms? Every parent will know what you are talking about when you speak of waiting and of discerning God's promises and their fulfillment in both birth and baptism. Waiting? Discerning? Fulfillment? Sounds like Advent-Christmas to me. You might even want to name those born and/or baptized during the past liturgical year.

And most parishes will have been visited by death. The funeral or memorial can be easily visualized by those who mourn and those who remember. Their mood is not different from the mood of those faithful who stood at the foot of the cross. God's promise often seems remote at that moment, perhaps even God seems remote, and but for the one who hung on the cross, God is remote, but God keeps promises. Thus the Lenten-Easter tension is experienced again by all.

No doubt there were signs of mission during the year past. Building, reaching in, reaching out, new efforts in community or world. Sounds like Epiphany or Pentecost to me.

Of course, such a recital needs to carefully find its way between the Scylla of the self-congratulatory and the Charybdis of saying nothing, but it can be done by keeping the focus on Grace Delivered. "Let all the people say: Amen!" Grace Delivered! Amen.

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