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Thank You, Ralph W. Klein

For thirty-five years, without one cent of monetary compensation, Ralph W. Klein served as Editor in Chief of *Currents in Theology and Mission,* assisted by Peggy Blomenberg for the last eighteen of those years. In the December issue, Ralph expressed deep thanks to Peggy not only for the skill she brought to her work as Assistant Editor but for her faithfulness to this ministry. He also welcomed Ann Rezny, Peggy's successor, who has brought her own skill and dedication to producing the journal.

This issue marks the first issue of *Currents* without Ralph Klein at the helm as Editor in Chief. As we carry on the legacy of his commitment to the quality and usefulness of *Currents* for church leaders and academicians alike, we recall the words of colleague David Rhoads about Ralph's guidance of the journal:

> His work has been energetic and enthusiastic for the periodical that has done so much for the church and academy. He has produced issues on many themes critical to the life of the church and the world. He has offered issues on upcoming lectionary cycles for preachers. He has invited and welcomed articles from people of diverse faiths and different denominations. He has provided for articles that were seminal for the academic world. He has offered a venue for many faculty members of ELCA colleges and seminaries to share their work in print. He has included preaching aids and book reviews.[1]

Humbled by the size of the shoes to be filled and grateful for the ongoing sponsorship and partnership of our colleagues from Wartburg Theological Seminary and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary as well as from our own seminary, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, we launch this first issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* under the leadership of a new editorial team.

The June issue includes the two plenary lectures and the sermons of the 2008 Leadership Conference at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. The theme of that Conference was "Perfect Potential: Excellence in Ministry," and all the offerings of this issue address this theme.

Kathleen D. Billman
Kurt K. Hendel
Mark N. Swanson
Editors

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[1] David Rhoads, "Scholarship in the Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph Klein," *Currents in Theology and Mission,* 35:4 (August 2008): 242.

Stories That Take Us Somewhere: The Narrative Work of Congregations

James P. Wind
President of The Alban Institute
Herndon, VA

LSTC Leadership Conference
February 11, 2008

I wish to begin by expressing my gratitude for the privilege of participating in this conference. It is a gift to have the opportunity to think and learn together about leadership excellence in pastoral ministry.

The theme I have chosen for this presentation, "The narrative work of congregations," is one that sits at the heart of my life and work. As a historian, pastor, grant-maker, and for the last fourteen years as president of the Alban Institute, this special kind of work has been a unifying thread. At the same time "the narrative work of congregations" provides an overarching framework for so much of what we call pastoral ministry; it goes on in, with, and under the many, nitty-gritty tasks that make up the daily work of parish ministry.

This theme is also very personal for me. Like you, when I look back over my life, I can see that my life has unfolded in an ongoing series of narrative episodes. Each episode has had moments of narrative breakdown or crisis on the one hand and narrative break-through or construction on the other.

To take just one example, let me focus for a moment on the breakdown of my denominational home world. From my earliest childhood days I was on course to become a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod pastor. I was following a family, congregational, and denominational plotline. The story worked (more or less) through high school. Then, as the American cultural story went up for grabs (it was the 60s!), the denominational story changed as the Missouri Synod was turned radically to the right. At the same time, my personal story changed as I came of age in a suddenly very different world from the one into which I was born.

The apex of that crisis for me came during my seminary years at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, when the faculty I studied under and came to love was condemned by the Synod for teaching doctrine "not to be tolerated in the church of God." That verdict and the political machinations that drove it led to the forced retirement of beloved professors, the suspension of John H. Tietjen, Concordia Seminary's President, and the surprising moment when I found myself decisively breaking with my home world story and joining my seminary classmates in calling for a moratorium on classes at the seminary. My fellow students and I brought seminary life to a turning point, disobeyed the synodical leadership, and set in motion a new story that led first to a seminary in exile. A different plot line began to unfold. A new Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches also stepped out of the old Missouri Synod story and set forth in a new direction which took them into relations with other Lutheran denominations that eventuated in the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

I recount this single chapter in my personal narrative for several reasons. First, I would not be standing here today giving this presentation had not that narrative break-down and its subsequent narrative break-through to a new kind of Lutheran identity happened. Second, the story—with its unfolding consequences in my life and thousands of others, demonstrates that our stories matter. Changes in them make all the difference in the world.

Not too long ago I heard Martin E. Marty, who was my major teacher and advisor across the street at the University of Chicago, talk to the American Council of Learned Societies about what he called "chance determinations." The phrase holds a paradox. On the one hand little things, sometimes even random things, or major crises come along in life that we do not anticipate. At the time they happen they seem so odd, so unplanned that we can see no way that they fit into our life story. They are moments of "chance." But, as they interrupt the plotline of our lives, these chance happenings set in motion a new course of events. When we look back years later, we find out that these interruptions in fact set a course; they determined our futures.[1]

In Marty's case, he delights in telling the story of how a fake theologian changed the course of his career. Most of you here know of Marty's running gag (it now has developed quite a life of its own) about Franz Bibfeldt, a fictional German theologian created by Marty and his Concordia Seminary classmates half a century ago. Marty and his colleagues had great fun planting Bibfeldt in their footnotes, putting fake book entries into the seminary library's card catalogue, and hoodwinking their professors. But one day Marty went too far. He lettered a diploma for Bibfeldt to receive at the seminary's commencement ceremonies. The comic calligrapher was punished. Instead of going to London, England, where he was already assigned to minister to a congregation of displaced Baltic immigrants, he was exiled to a parish in Chicago to be straightened out by a demanding senior pastor. His story was interrupted. In Chicago, Marty discovered the Divinity School (or did it discover him?), and he found himself, seemingly by accident, studying the topic that became his life's work—modern American Christianity. Had he not lettered that diploma for the non-existent theologian, he might not have become the "most influential interpreter of American religion," as *Time* magazine once called him. He had experienced a very important "chance determination."

Let me return to my own chance determination for a moment more. The decision I made in 1974 to stop going to classes at Concordia Seminary took me off my career path. I did not get a diploma from Concordia Seminary. Instead I have one hanging on my wall from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a school I had never set foot in during my M.Div years. Leaders at this school, along with leaders at St. Louis University (a Roman Catholic institution), Eden Seminary in St. Louis (U.C.C.), and the Association of Theological Schools cut through mountains of red tape to find a way to validate the theological education we had received in St. Louis from the fired seminary faculty. Had those theological educators not figured out how to do that, my life would have been very different.

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[1] Martin E. Marty, *A Life of Learning,* ACLS Occasional Paper Series, No. 62 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2006).

Permit me to use this occasion to repay several debts. I want to thank LSTC for the difference it made in my life-narrative by interrupting its story and revising its rules to make room for those of us who were living as a seminary in exile. I also want to thank my Christ Seminary-Seminex teachers, several of whom were once faculty members here and are now sainted like John Tietjen and Robert Bertram, and others who still teach here like Ralph Klein, Edgar Krentz, Robert Conrad, Mark Bangert, and Kurt Hendel. Their life stories changed my own narrative in countless ways. Now it gives me great joy to see that my daughter Rachel studies here and continues the ongoing legacy of that 1974 chance determination even as it unfolds in new and unpredictable ways.

What got set in motion back in St. Louis in the 70s set me on a course of graduate study at the University of Chicago, parish ministry at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Ill., research in congregational studies, grant-making at the Lilly Endowment, and work in the field of bioethics at Lutheran General Hospital and then the Park Ridge Center. Finally, the trajectory opened by that early chance determination and other subsequent ones led me to my work at the Alban Institute.

Normally, I do not go on at such length about my own story in presentations like this. Here I did so for several reasons. First, I chose to tell my story to remind us of how amazingly intricate each of our stories are. They are marvels! This can become really fun if we take the time to thicken out our stories. For example, how different would my life story be if Martin Marty had not lettered that diploma, or if my seminary professors had not challenged the Missouri Synod so powerfully, or if LSTC President Walter Wohlbrecht had not risked giving me a degree from this school. Our stories are so interwoven, so full of dramatic twists and turns, so fragile yet resilient, and so largely unknown by even our closest friends and colleagues. Failure to know our stories, to search our stories, to rework and to recall them leaves us—as individuals and as people who live and work together—poorer, weaker.

The second reason for my autobiographical reminiscence has to do with a thread that runs through my journey. Since the Missouri Synod story came apart for me, I have been working to understand the power of religious stories in America's religious life—in its public sphere, in its various denominational manifestations, and especially in local congregations. All of us who work in congregations, who teach in seminaries, who serve denominations, who live in this American environment, and who move around in the global community that is forming today are involved in a great narrative dance. My little life story reminds us that every one of us is in the dance, that we are living with stories that are coming apart and stories that are still in the making. In short, all of us are being taken somewhere by our stories, and most of the time we are unaware of their power and their direction.

This is especially the case in the local congregations for whom this seminary prepares new pastors. Each of the congregations that this school's graduates will serve is teeming with stories. Let's do the math for a minute (Alban's chief financial officer cringes when I do math in public). I told you only a portion of my story. My life is no more complex than most folks. So imagine the narrative complexity if you multiply my one narrative journey times 300 congregation members, or 3,000. If we want to know why congregations are so difficult to lead somewhere—or why they are capable of stunning accomplishments—we have to come to grips with the fact that all these individual stories—with their pains and tragedies and their joys and surprises—are in play. They swirl around, jostle each other, and interweave. Excellent pastoral ministry can happen when these narratives are freed, when they are brought into shared frameworks of meaning and purpose, and when new collective stories are created that take a group from narrative breakdown towards narrative breakthrough.

So what does this narrative dance look like in the local congregation? Every day at the Alban Institute, we work with pastors and congregation members whose stories are breaking down, are stuck, or are waiting to change. We hear about debilitating *conflict* between pastors and their church council, between staff members, between congregational factions, and on and on. We work with a wide variety of congregations that hire consultants, go to conferences, conduct strategic planning processes, try the latest hot program, but stay stunningly the same. Regularly, we are invited to assist congregations that sense a need to move in a new direction, begin a new ministry, change their worship style, and reach out to a new group in their community, but do not know how to get from here to there.

These narrative breakdowns come in all shapes and sizes. For example, not too long ago I worked with three talented new senior clergy from the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., area who came independently to me, vexed by a similar problem. On the surface, they reported, things seemed okay, but they felt that their vestries and church councils were not fully supportive. So we invited the clergy and the key lay leaders from their congregations to talk together about what was happening in their congregations. We asked them to tell their congregational stories. Within the first hour of conversation, we discovered that in each local parish the key leaders were not sharing a common congregational story, that instead each leader, clergy and lay alike, was living out of his or her particular personal story and that they collided.

Sometimes the narrative breakdowns come into view suddenly—and painfully. In his wonderful new book, *The Language of God*, the great American geneticist Francis S. Collins tells about his journey to Christian faith as he led the Human Genome Project.[2] The book is a fine example of the intricate narrative work that goes on in the lives of the people in our pews. At one point, Collins recounts a talk he gave on his scientific work at a "highly regarded Protestant Church" just outside the District of Columbia. Things were going fine in the well-attended adult forum until one church member turned to the congregation's senior pastor and asked "whether he believed that the first chapter of Genesis was a literal, step-by-step, day-by-day description of the origins of the earth and of humankind." I am sure many of you have had one of these fish-or-cut-bait pastoral moments. If not, you will. "In an instant brows furrowed and jaws tightened. Harmony retreated to the far corners of the room. The pastor's carefully worded response, worthy of the most deft politician, managed utterly to avoid answering the question. Most of the [people] looked relieved that a confrontation had been avoided, but the spell was broken."

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[2] Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

This little incident—reported by a world class scientist who is attempting to re-write the story of the conflict between science and religion—is revelatory. It reminds us that new scientific knowledge constantly threatens old religious stories. It reveals how nervous congregations can get when the narrative fissures in their lives come to the surface. And for those who lead congregations, it underscores how hard it is to deal with the narrative breakdown and congregational propensities to paper over the issues, talk around them, and try to get back to harmony as quickly as possible. It is all too easy in situations like this one to blame the pastor for not being skilled enough to provide an instant, perfect answer. More realistically, the pastor's hemming and hawing is an embodiment of the enormous narrative confusion in the congregation.

Or, to give one more example, not too long ago I was speaking to leaders of an association of tall steeple churches. My topic was a challenging one: the role of congregations in creating places for a different kind of public discourse on divisive moral issues—abortion, sexuality, war, torture, the environment, and the growing gap between rich and poor. I held up Jimmy Carter's 2005 book, *Our Endangered Moral Values: America's Moral Crisis*, as an example of how one American church member sought to be clear about the relationship between the Christian story and the toughest moral challenges of the day.[3] I urged the congregation leaders to become places where people could share their deepest moral convictions and test them. Immediately, a pastor of one of those congregations responded in deep frustration, "My congregation is the last place where that could happen."

Underneath this cleric's frustration were several things. First, he was leading a congregation—like many in America—in which there were powerful, clashing moral stories. They co-existed in uneasy silence, ready to explode at any moment. Second, like many clergy, he was trying to figure out his own moral positions at the same time that he was trying to broker strongly held differences. There was no narrative path forward, so he and his congregation stood still on the great moral issues of the day.

A wide variety of factors contribute to the narrative gridlock and dissonance that we find in so many congregations. Theologians would remind us of the realities of finitude and fallenness that exist within every dimension of human life—including the congregational one. Historians and sociologists would talk about the major forces of modernity, things like: 1) the explosion of modern knowledge; 2) the mixing of peoples due to immigration patterns and the globalization of economies; 3) the worldview-altering impacts of higher education, urbanization, and modern transportation; 4) the collision of cultures and religions; 5) the rampant individualism of Western cultures—especially the U.S., 6) and on and on. Add it all up and at the bottom line we find that the people in our congregations swim in a sea of narrative options. The media and internet flood us with story lines. Instead of living in one clear story, we simultaneously exist in a multitude of stories that go in contradictory directions.

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[3] Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Moral Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

And yet, once in a while, a congregation forges a powerful shared sense of identity and creates a new shared story line. Our conference preacher Heidi Neumark's wonderful book *Breathing Space* about her ministry at Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx provides a beautiful example of that possibility.[4] At Alban, we have been conducting research on how pastors practice narrative leadership. We are turning up many interesting stories. In Alban's magazine, *Congregations*, Pastor Mike Mather, of Broadway United Methodist Church, Indianapolis, Indiana, tells of a new church position that he calls a Roving Listener, a person who moves about the congregation's inner city neighborhood gathering the people's stories. His congregation's new polity also includes a committee that he calls Animators of the Spirit. These Animators join the community members in the shared ministry of constructing new stories in urban Indianapolis.[5]

How does it happen? One of my favorite congregational stories is of a small French Protestant Church in the rural village of Le Chambon. In the early 1940s this humble congregation resisted one of the greatest narrative juggernauts in human history. Adolph Hitler's Nazis had taken control of France and all of Europe. Their evil story of racial supremacy and Holocaust was silencing the voices of almost all moral and religious leaders. Yet this one congregation, in a remote village of 3,000, managed to save 5,000 refugees (2,500 of them Jews) from the occupying Nazis who surrounded them. One congregation lived a story of life when everyone else was trapped in a story of death.

How did they do it? The story is told in Philip Hallie's moving book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.[6] At the heart of the story were Pastor Andrew Trocmé and his wife Magda. When the Trocmés first came to town, they felt it was moving towards "death, death, death," and that the pastor was entrusted with helping the village die. So, they went to work to shape a new congregational story—one that produced a radical kind of hospitality to strangers that risked all of Le Chambon's lives.

Pastor Trocmé would never have used a phrase like leadership strategies, but Hallie's account reveals that he indeed had some. First, he preached sermons on the Good Samaritan—and repeatedly called his people to resist hatred and cherish life.

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[4] Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey into the South Bronx* (Boston: Beacon Press: 2003).

[5] Mather's work, along with that of others, is reported in *Congregations: The Alban Journal 34* (Winter, 2008).

[6] Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper Perennial: 1994).

Next, he formed a local leadership group of 13 and met bi-weekly with them to learn together how to transform a sleepy village into a city of refuge. Then, he and his 13 led a "kitchen struggle" in which they sat with all the village people in their homes and there shaped a new story, one table at a time. Magda's parsonage table became the model for what Hallie called Le Chambon's "kitchen table theology."

The Sunday sermons and kitchen table conversations spilled out into the streets of the town. Together the people of Le Chambon created a special school for the refugee children brought to their community and practiced small acts of resistance like not ringing the bells when the Nazis ordered. Over time, the congregation became masters at hiding refugees—manufacturing fake IDs, building a network of 20 safe houses, and telling a shared story that never revealed a single target to the Nazi death squads.

Trocmé knew that the way to help Le Chambon be a source of life came through the basic acts of pastoral leadership: preaching a sermon; visiting in homes; leading meetings; recruiting and training a leadership team; telling the same basic story of God's radical Samaritan-style love for the persecuted strangers again and again and in every imaginable way. Embodying the story he told, the night that he was arrested by the SS—this gives this Lutheran chills—he and Magda served the arresting Nazis supper. While they ate, the congregation gathered outside the parsonage and then as the Nazis led Trocmé out the door to the car waiting to take him to prison, they sang "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." A whole congregation had learned to sing one tune, to live one story.

Our time is different than Le Chambon's. But our time demands narrative work as creative and bold as Trocmé's. Everything that a pastor does can build a narrative or tear it down. The basic everyday tasks of pastoral ministry—preaching a sermon, celebrating the Eucharist, baptizing an infant, training a leadership team, running a church council meeting, visiting parishioners at home, work, hospital—these are the powerful narrative instruments placed in a pastor's hands. Every part of the pastor's life and work can build a story that takes people somewhere. Many skills and competencies are required to do this narrative work, and those are worthy of more time than we have today.

But at the heart of this narrative work lies a redemptive story—one that keeps being retold no matter how many other stories crowd it or try to drown it out. In the midst of all the world's narrative breakdowns and crises, the story that Trocmé knew and told and lived by keeps rising.

Let me conclude by returning once more to my chance determination of 1974. As our personal, professional, and denominational stories came apart in January of that year, John Tietjen kept reminding the Seminex community of the Gospel story. That story moved us forward then. How fitting, then, that this Christmas, 33 years later, I received from his widow Ernestine the book that John wrote as he died from cancer. The book, called *The Gospel According to Jesus*, retold the Gospel story—as John imagined that Jesus would tell it himself.[7] That story, he felt, needed to be told one more time, to help him—and us—move forward.

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[7] John H. Tietjen, *The Gospel According to Jesus,* ed. Paul Bauermeister (Fenton, MO: Creative Communications for the Parish, 2006).

Faithfulness: Luther's Vision of Excellence in Ministry

Kurt K. Hendel

Bernard, Fischer, Westberg Distinguished Ministry Professor of Reformation History
Director of M.A. Programs, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Any discussion of ministry inspires a certain amount of passion in the church. Differing perspectives become readily apparent regarding the definition of ministry, its nature and sphere of responsibilities and its structure. The question of expectations also engenders substantial debate. That ministry remains a lively topic of conversation and an important concern within the church is confirmed by the fact that it has been chosen as the topic of our Leadership Conference this year and that you are participating in this Conference.

I have been invited to address the theme of excellence in ministry in light of Martin Luther's theological and practical insights, and I very much appreciate the invitation and the opportunity to do so. The Reformer is not only one of the most creative and influential theologians in the history of the church, he pursued his own ministry for more than four decades, most of that time as an ordained clergyperson. During these years he formulated his doctrine of ministry and reflected creatively and honestly on his own ministry, on that of his colleagues and opponents and on the ministry of all of God's people. His theological perspectives, experientially informed proposals and practical example have impacted the doctrine and practice of ministry within the Lutheran community since the Reformation. Indeed, many of his ideas have also been affirmed and implemented within other ecclesiastical traditions. Hence, this exploration of Luther's perspective is warranted, for the Reformer continues to provide the church with theologically astute and creative insights.

Luther had lofty expectations of God, of the church as a community of faith and as an institution, of the leadership of that community and of himself. God not only fulfilled but far exceeded his expectations. However, that was not the case with human beings, even when they pursued lofty vocations, exercised much power or received a great deal of respect or fear from their fellow human beings. Hence, he held his contemporaries and himself accountable and sought to provide the people of God with the resources necessary to strive for excellence, particularly excellence in ministry. Sufficient knowledge, finely honed native skills, unflinching dedication, a readiness to risk bitter opposition as well as wholehearted support and a willingness to serve were to characterize Christians as they pursued their ministerial vocation. However, none of these ideals were more important than faithfulness. From Luther's perspective, excellence in ministry consisted ultimately and primarily of this divine virtue, and the three components of excellence were a faithful identity, the faithful pursuit of a divine vocation and faithful living. That is the thesis of this presentation.

The first essential requisite for excellence in ministry is a faithful identity. That is to be expected. It is only when we know who we are that it will become apparent what we are called to be and do. According to Luther, all Christians are priests. That is their ultimate identity, which is created in and through baptism. The Reformer notes:

> For a priest, especially in the New Testament, was not made but was born. He was created, not ordained. He was born not indeed of flesh, but through a birth of the Spirit, by water and Spirit in the washing of regeneration [John 3:6f; Titus 3:5f]. Indeed, all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians. Worthy of anathema is any assertion that a priest is anything else than a Christian.[1]

Luther makes this point more succinctly when he asserts: "A Priest is not identical with a Presbyter or Minister—for one is born to be priest, one becomes a minister."[2]

In baptism, individuals are welcomed into the community of faith, and their faith then shapes their priestly identity. Luther insists, therefore, that "faith must do everything. Faith alone is the true priestly office….Therefore all Christian men are priests, all women priestesses, be they young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned."[3]

Because priesthood constitutes the believers' very essence, it defines their identity. All Christians are, therefore, ontologically the same. There are no essential differences among them. In light of this basic theological presupposition Luther challenged common ecclesiastical and societal assumptions and ideals. Specifically, he rejected the medieval notion that the clergy are the spiritual estate because of the indelible character imputed through ordination and that all other Christians constitute the temporal estate. Such a hierarchical world view was inconsistent with his baptismal theology and the concomitant doctrine of the universal priesthood. While his assertions were revolutionary in his own context and inspired ardent opposition, particularly from the clerical hierarchy, they were also welcomed by many lay Christians as well as ordained leaders of the church, and they inspired not only ecclesiological reforms but also a different understanding of societal structures. Quite obviously, contemporary understandings of ministry and of ordination were also impacted in substantial ways.

The Reformer insists that all Christians are part of the spiritual estate because they have all become priests since they share the same baptism, the same gospel and the same faith.[4] This priestly identity into which they are born transcends and shapes all their other identities and callings. On the basis of these insights, which are informed by his baptismal theology, Luther also formulated his doctrine of vocation. All of these ideas coalesced already by 1520, soon after his emergence as an evangelical theologian. Thus he asserted in his "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church":

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[1] "Concerning the Ministry," in Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), Vol. 40, 19. Hereafter referred to as LW.

[2] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40, 18.

[3] "A Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass," LW 35,101.

[4] "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," LW 44,127. Hereafter

> …[T]he works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but… all works are measured before God by faith alone….Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.[5]

Luther's point is clear. Baptism and faith determine whether individuals are priests or not, whether they are part of the spiritual estate or not and whether their labors are spiritual and God-pleasing or not. The baptismal, priestly calling thus impacts all that believers are and do.

While Luther ardently defended the universal priesthood, he also insisted that the baptized priests must choose individuals from among their ranks to serve as pastors in the church. The priesthood is the calling and identity of all the baptized, and pastoral ministry is the particular vocation of the ordained. Good order, practical necessity and Christ's institution require the establishment of the ordained ministry. The Reformer cautioned that what belongs to all cannot be usurped by any. Thus, good order must be manifest within the community of faith. He notes:

> Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.)[6]

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referred to as "To the Christian Nobility." See also Luther's "The Misuse of the Mass," LW 36,141: "Because the words of Peter [I Pet 2:9] are spoken to all Christians, if he wishes the anointed and tonsured priesthood to be comprehended therein, it follows that the holy, pious women and children are also tonsured and anointed priests. For Peter's words apply to all Christians of whichever priesthood; they make the priesthood common to all Christians."

[5] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,78.

[6] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,116. See also "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,34: "It is of the common rights of Christians that we have been speaking. For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. Lay hold then of this right and exercise it, where there is no one else who has the same rights. But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly. Otherwise, there might be shameful confusion among the people of God, and a kind of Babylon in the church, where everything shall be done in order, as

Such order is crucial because it facilitates the preaching of the gospel.

In addition to good order, practical considerations also require the appointment of pastors. After all, the necessities of life, the needs of society, the diverse responsibilities of daily living and the variety of gifts and callings make it impossible for the baptized to fulfill the unique functions of ministry on a daily basis. Hence, specific individuals are chosen by the community who perform the tasks of ministry, both as representatives of Christ and of their fellow priests.

Most importantly, Luther notes that God has instituted the office of ministry and has chosen specific people to be God's unique witnesses.[7] The church has therefore affirmed the office of the ordained. Luther agrees with this tradition and identifies the ministry as a particular mark of the church:

> Fifth, the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers….There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ….The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person….[H]e alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments. The others should be content with this arrangement and agree to it.[8]

Pastors may then transmit the pastoral office to others, with the consent of the community.[9]

The fact that Luther affirmed both the universal priesthood and the ordained ministry and that he insisted that the ordained ministry is both instituted by Christ and is also constituted through the choice of the community has inspired substantial debate within Lutheranism. Disagreements persist regarding the precise relationship between the baptized priests and the ordained ministers, regarding the rights and privileges of each and over the question whether the ordained ministry is or is not derived from the universal priesthood. It is likely that Luther would have considered such debates to be rather curious and inconsequential. His concerns were to clarify necessary consequences of his baptismal theology, to confirm scriptural principles and to address the ministry needs of the church, and he believed that he had done so in theologically defensible and practically efficacious ways. He also trusted that he provided the church with principles and resources which would foster excellence in ministry.

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the Apostle teaches [I Cor 14:40]. For it is one thing to exercise a right publicly; another to use it in time of emergency. Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church. In time of emergency each may use it as he deems best."

[7] "To the Christian Nobility," LW 44,176: "I want to speak only of the ministry which God has instituted, the responsibility of which is to minister word and sacrament to the congregation, among whom they reside."

[8] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,154.

[9] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,36: "With the approval of the community these might then delegate the office to others."

It is important to recognize that Luther viewed ministry primarily in functional terms. While the baptismal priesthood is an ontological reality which defines the believers' essence and being and gives them a particular status or *Stand*, ministry is an office or *Amt*. That office consists of fulfilling specific functions. "Therefore, a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an officeholder," insists Luther.[10] The specific functions of ministry will be discussed below.

Call and ordination are the means used by God and the community to constitute the ordained ministry. While the call is both internal and external, the latter is most important because it confirms the inner call and brings assurance both to the pastor and to the community. Thus Luther stresses: "If we did not hold fast to and emphasize the call and commission, there would finally be no church….So we say, either demand proof of a call and commission to preach, or immediately enjoin silence and forbid to preach, for an office is involved—the office of ministry. One cannot hold an office without a commission or a call."[11]

The call is essential, and ordination is the public affirmation of the call. Although Luther rejected ordination as a sacrament, he eventually viewed it as scripturally warranted and as functionally effective and useful. He came to that conclusion by 1523 when he stated:

> Ordination indeed was first instituted on the authority of Scripture, and according to the example and decrees of the Apostle, in order to provide the people with ministers of the Word. The public ministry of the Word, I hold, by which the mysteries of God are made known, ought to be established by holy ordination as the highest and greatest of the functions of the church, on which the whole power of the church depends, since the church is nothing without the Word and everything in it exists by virtue of the Word alone.[12]

This passage not only clarifies the essential function of the office of ministry, namely, the proclamation of God's word, particularly of the gospel,[13] but it also indicates the great respect that Luther had for the pastoral office. He calls it "the highest and greatest of the functions of the church," not because he sought to foster a hierarchical perspective or because he affirmed the powers and privileges which the medieval church claimed for the clergy. His great respect for the ordained ministry is inspired instead by the fact that it is ultimately the ministry of the word. It is important to note, however, that proclamation of the word is shared with the universal priests, just like all the other functions of ministry. Hence, Luther stresses that a "Christian… is born to the ministry of the Word in baptism."[14] Pastors, however, have the special privilege of proclaiming the word publicly and that makes their vocation "the greatest and highest."

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[10] "To the Christian Nobility," LW 44,129.

[11] "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers," LW 40,386.

[12] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,11.

[13] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,116: "Furthermore, the priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word—the Word, I say; not the law, but the gospel." See also "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,36: "Inasmuch as the office of preaching the gospel is the greatest of all and certainly is apostolic, it becomes the foundation for all other functions, which are built upon it, such as the offices of teachers, prophets, governing [the church], speaking with tongues, the gifts of healing and helping, as Paul directs in I Cor 12[:28]. Even Christ chiefly proclaimed the gospel, as the highest function of his office, and did not baptize [John 4:2]. Paul, too, gloried in the fact that he was sent not to baptize [I Cor 1:17], as to a secondary office, but to the primary office of preaching the gospel."

Rather than focusing on power, authority and wealth, Luther envisioned the pastoral office in terms of ministry and service.[15] Those chosen for this crucial office in the church "are not lords, but servants.[16]" They serve God's people who have chosen them and among whom they minister, and they serve God as God's instruments and as stewards of the unique gifts God has given to the church. Service, of course, also characterizes the calling of the universal priests since they have been united with Christ through faith and have received their baptismal call to follow Christ and pursue his priestly vocation.

Excellence in ministry thus begins with a faithful identity. For people of faith that identity is their priesthood, bestowed in and through baptism. This priesthood is viewed functionally by Luther and consists of a call to carry out the unique responsibilities that Christ himself has given to his people. While all the baptized have the authority to exercise those functions,[17] the ordained are called to the

Rather than focusing on power, authority and wealth, Luther envisioned the pastoral office in terms of ministry and service.

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[14] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40, 37.

[15] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,112-13: "If they were forced to grant that all of us that have been baptized are equally priests, as indeed we are, and that only the ministry was committed them, yet with our common consent, they would then know that they have no right to rule over us except insofar as we freely concede it. For thus it is written in I Pet 2[:9]: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a priestly royalty.' Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry. This we learn from I Cor 4[:1]: 'This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.'"

[16] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,27.

[17] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,34-35: "Here we take our stand: There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord's Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted. There is no other kind

particular office within the community of faith whose obligation it is to carry out the responsibilities of ministry as the representatives of Christ and of their fellow priests. Both the baptized priests and the ordained pastors are engaged in a shared ministry, however, and the ministerial functions reflect the priestly identity of the baptized.

Luther identifies the functions of ministry in his treatise, "Concerning the Ministry," which was addressed to the Christians in Bohemia but whose insights were applicable to the whole Christian community. The Reformer summarizes the priestly functions in the following manner:

> Mostly the functions of a priest are these: to teach, to preach and proclaim the Word of God, to baptize, to consecrate or administer the Eucharist, to bind and loose sins, to pray for others, to sacrifice, and to judge of all doctrines and spirits. Certainly these are splendid and royal duties. But the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate with the Word, we bind and absolve sins by the Word, we baptize with the Word, we sacrifice with the Word, we judge all things by the Word.[18]

This list of ministerial functions is not surprising. Ministry from Luther's perspective has to do with the care of souls, with *Seelsorge*.[19] It has to do with God's work in the world. Ministry is intended to heal broken relationships and to bring wholeness, life and salvation. It is the ministry of word and sacraments precisely because of these realities, and its faithful pursuit is essential for the well-being of God's people. Excellence in ministry thus consists of the diligent exercise of these divinely instituted functions which constitute the priestly vocation. In addition to a faithful identity, the faithful pursuit of a divine vocation is the second component of excellent ministry.

As the previous quotation from Luther indicates so strikingly, the first and foremost function of ministry is the teaching and preaching of the word. Indeed, ministry is properly defined as ministry of the word. The significance of God's word for effective ministry and for the well-being of the church cannot be exaggerated. It is the chief mark of the church, according to the Reformer.

> First, the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the holy word of God….This is the principal item, and the holiest of holy possessions, by reason of which the Christian people are called holy; for God's word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches; it is indeed the very holiness of God….[20]

The word is not only a holy possession, but it is constitutive of the church and

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of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose. There is no other sacrifice than of the body of every Christian. No one but a Christian can pray. No one but a Christian may judge of doctrine. These make the priestly and royal office."

[18] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,21.

[19] "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers," LW 40,384: "For to the pastor is committed the pulpit, baptism, the sacrament [of the altar], and he is charged with the care of souls."

[20] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,148-49.

thus necessary for its very existence. There is, therefore, a necessary and symbiotic relationship between the word and God's people. Luther makes the unflinching assertion that "…God's word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word."[21] It is quite logical to conclude, then, "that the ministry of the Word is the highest office in the church." and that it belongs to all the baptized priests.[22] Without this ministry there is no church because there are no believers. If there are no believers then the word is also not preached and the gift of salvation, granted freely for Christ's sake, is not shared. The eternal destiny of humanity is, therefore, at stake.

God's word is, of course, a dialectical word. It is law and gospel. While these must be carefully distinguished, they dare never be separated or confused.[23] The proclamation of the law is necessary because of the reality and power of sin, not only in natural human beings, but even in the baptized saints and priests who, nevertheless, remain sinners as well. Sin thus necessitates the law. Because he was not a systematic theologian, Luther's understanding of the law is not always expressed with the formulaic precision of Philip Melanchthon or the Formula of Concord. However, the Reformer does generally cite two functions of the law, and he emphasizes particularly that God does God's alien work of condemning sin and of leading the sinner to despair by means of the law.

The first use of the law, according to Luther, is the civil or political use which is intended to curb sin, to punish evildoers and to protect the innocent. God exercises this use of the law through constituted authorities, such as parents, teachers and particularly temporal governments. The goal of this function of the law is to produce civil righteousness, facilitate justice and bring about peace, all of which greatly benefit society, though they contribute nothing to justification and, hence, to salvation.[24] Luther summarizes his understanding of the first use of the law and its effects in his "Smalcald Articles": "Here we maintain that the law was given by God, in the first place, to curb sin by means of the threat and terror of punishment and also by means of the promise and offer of grace and favor."[25] The Reformer believes, however, that this function of the law does not always accomplish its purpose because of the pervasive reality and the radical power of sin.

The second, chief or theological function of the law is, therefore, crucial. This use of the law is directly related to God's saving work and is necessarily complementary to the gospel. It is specifically through this function of the law that God accomplishes God's alien work by revealing sin; confronting humans with the reality of their brokenness and rebelliousness; demonstrating to them that they cannot fulfill the law, particularly the first commandment, and, thus, leading them to despair. This alien work of condemning sin and terrifying the conscience is necessary, for only then will humans cease their attempts to save themselves and to barter with God on the basis of presumed human merit. Only then will they abandon their efforts to usurp God's place by not letting God be God. Only then will they recognize that they are in dire need of radical good news and that they are utterly dependent on God for their very identity, for all their needs and for their eternal destiny. Luther also summarizes this function of the law in the "Smalcald Articles":

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[21] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,150. See also the discussion of the centrality of the word in the life of the church in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. by Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 288-89. Hereafter referred to as Althaus.

[22] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,23.

[23] Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, tr. by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 267-69. Hereafter referred to as Lohse. See also Althaus, 256-58.

[24] Lohse, 270-71. See also Althaus, 251-52.

[25] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Smalcald Articles III,2, 311. Hereafter referred to as Book of Concord.

> The foremost office or power of the law is that it reveals inherited sin and its fruits. It shows human beings into what utter depths their nature has fallen and how completely corrupt it is. The law must say to them that they neither have nor respect any god or that they worship foreign gods. This is something that they would not have believed before without the law. Thus they are terrified, humbled, despondent, and despairing. They anxiously desire help but do not know where to find it; they start to become enemies of God, to murmur, etc. This is what is meant by Romans [4:15]: "The law brings wrath," and Romans 5[:20], "Sin becomes greater through the law."[26]

The theological use of the law is, therefore, essential for the proclamation of the gospel. Human beings will only recognize their need of radical good news after they have been confronted with and are realistically and experientially aware of their alienation from God and their utter helplessness. They must despair of themselves. Only then are they prepared for and able to hear the gospel.[27]

Convinced that he was faithfully interpreting St. Paul, Luther proclaimed boldly and consistently that the gospel is the wondrous good news of God's redemptive acts in and through Christ and the blessed assurance that the benefits of Christ's saving activity are given to human beings as gracious gifts granted in and through faith. The gospel has nothing to do with commands but solely with promises. "So you see," notes Luther, "that the gospel is really not a book of laws and commandments which requires deeds of us, but a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives us all his possessions and benefits of Christ."[28] This is because Christ literally comes to us in the gospel, or we are brought to him.[29] Thus God accomplishes God's proper, saving and justifying work through the gospel as faith is created and the gifts of forgiveness, wholeness, life and salvation are granted to the believer. Luther's Christo-centric and fide-centric perspective

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26. Book of Concord, Smalcald Articles, III,2, 312.

27. Lohse, 271-73; Althaus, 251-55; 258-59; 268-69.

28. "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels ," LW 35,120.

29. "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," LW 35,121.

is clearly evident as he describes the dynamic interplay between law and gospel in God's justifying work.

> Now when a man has learned through the commandments to recognize his helplessness and is distressed about how he might satisfy the law—since the law must be fulfilled…then, being truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself nothing whereby he may be justified and saved. Here the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying, "If you wish to fulfill the law…believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things."…God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing.[30]

Faith, this essential gift which brings with it all other gifts, is created only through the preaching of the gospel, according to Luther, and the Reformer insisted that the gospel is a living, dynamic word which is shared most effectively when it is preached. This is why he argues that "the gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth."[31] The proclamation of the word, particularly the gospel, is, therefore, the first and foremost function of ministry.

While the living, spoken word is the primary expression of the gospel, the sacraments, the material word, proclaim the same radical good news and are means whereby God's gifts of grace are shared with God's people. The ministry is, therefore, the ministry of word and sacrament, and excellence in ministry also consists of the faithful administration of baptism and of Christ's Supper. While the preached word addresses the whole community, the sacramental word is spoken to each individual. Thus it is a personal word that brings good news to each believer. That is the uniqueness of the sacramental word. In baptism we are addressed by name and then baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist we are assured that the elements are the body and blood "for you." Luther makes this point in one of his eucharistic treatises:

> But when I distribute the sacrament, I designate it for the individual who is receiving it; I give him Christ's body and blood that he may have forgiveness of sins, obtained through his death and preached in the congregation. This is something more than the congregational sermon; for although the same thing is present in the sermon as in the sacrament, here there is the advantage that it is directed at definite individuals. In the sermon one does not point out or portray any particular person, but

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[30] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,348-49.

[31] "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," LW 35,123.

> in the sacrament it is given to you and to me in particular, so that the sermon comes to be our own.[32]

The personal, sacramental word is accompanied by a physical element in the sacrament, thereby affirming the mysterious reality that the material is a vehicle of the divine or that the finite holds the infinite.[33] The intimacy and concreteness of God's presence are thereby particularly confirmed by the sacraments. Thus, the sacramental ministry, normally exercised by the ordained clergy, is the means whereby the personal nature of God's word and the radical nature of God's presence are tangibly experienced by the individual members of the community of faith.

Baptizing is the second function of ministry. Luther considered baptism to be the first and foremost sacrament,[34] and in light of Matthew 28:18 and Mark 16:16 he stressed that it was instituted by God. It is not simply a human rite. Hence, he notes in the Large Catechism:

> Observe, first, that these words contain God's commandment and institution, so that no one may doubt that baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by human beings…. [B]aptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself.[35]

He warns, therefore, that baptizing should not be considered a matter of choice. Indeed, "we must be baptized or we shall not be saved."[36] The Reformer does nuance this statement in other writings and affirms that faith, which is necessary for salvation, is created through the preaching of the word as well. He also comforts troubled parents by noting that God welcomes children who have not survived the birth process as long as the parents have the intention of baptizing their children. Luther's point in the Large Catechism is obviously that baptism is not an adiaphoron, that Christians must heed Christ's command and that the benefits of baptism are such that the sacrament dare not be neglected. He also insists that baptism and salvation are connected. Baptism is, therefore, ultimately a matter of faith and trust in God's promises. The Reformer summarizes his position in the following manner:

> But no matter how external it [baptism] may be, here stand God's Word and command that have instituted, established, and confirmed baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be useless. Rather, it is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it may not be worth a straw….

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[32] "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics," LW 36,348-49.

[33] *finitum capax infiniti*. Luther emphasizes this concept particularly in his defense of the real presence against the symbolic interpretations of Huldreich Zwingli and his colleagues. See his two major eucharistic and Christological Treatises, "That these Words of Christ, 'This is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics" and "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" in LW 37.

[34] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40, 23: "For in baptizing we proffer the life-giving Word of God, which renews souls and redeems from death and sins. To baptize is incomparably greater than to consecrate bread and wine, for it is the greatest office of the church—the proclamation of the Word of God."

[35] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 457.

[36] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 457.

> What is more, it is performed in his [God's] name. So the words read, "Go baptize," not "in your name" but "in God's name."[37]

God's command was sufficient reason for Luther to baptize, primarily because he was convinced that God's commands are efficacious and are intended to benefit God's people. Heeding Christ's ordinances was, therefore, a matter of faith.

Luther defines baptism as "water enclosed in God's command and connected with God's Word."[38] The word is the crucial part of baptism, for it transforms common water into "a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water."[39]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the benefits of baptism are exceptional since they are truly divine gifts. As the baptismal candidate enters the waters of baptism or, more likely, has them poured over her, the old nature drowns and a new person arises. Her sin is forgiven, and the gifts of salvation and eternal life are bestowed on her.[40] Through baptism she becomes a child of God, a member of the body of Christ and a sister of all those who have been washed by the baptismal waters before her. Baptism thus distinguishes believers from all those who are not baptized because the sacrament makes them people of Christ, their Leader, "under whose banner of the holy cross" they struggle against sin.[41] All of these blessings are realities because God makes and keeps promises in baptism. Indeed, Luther insists that baptism would not be a sacrament at all if it did not include a divine promise. "For to constitute a sacrament there must be above all things else a word of divine promise, by which faith may be exercised."[42] The promise of baptism is made by Christ in Mark 16:16 when He says: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." It is crucial, therefore, that we never doubt that "once we have been baptized, we are saved."[43]

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[37] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 457. See also "Concerning Rebaptism," LW 40, 252: ""For even if I were never certain any more of faith, I still am certain of the command of God, that God has bidden to baptize, for this he has made known throughout the world. In this I cannot err, for God's command cannot deceive….True, one should add faith to baptism. But we are not to base baptism on faith."

[38] Book of Concord, "Small Catechism," 359. The scriptural passage to which Luther is referring is Matthew 28:19. See also Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 458: "[I]t is not simply plain water, but water placed in the setting of God's Word and commandment and made holy by them."

[39] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 458. See also Book of Concord, "Small Catechism," 359: "How can water do such great things? Answer: Clearly the water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life and a 'bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit,' as St. Paul says to Titus in chapter 3[:5-8], 'through the bath of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he richly poured out over us through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that through that very grace we may be righteous and heirs in hope of eternal life. This is surely most certainly true.'"

[40] Book of Concord, "Small Catechism," 359; Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 459

[41] "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," LW 35,29.

[42] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,92.

Luther cautions, however, that an essential prerequisite comes with a divine promise. The promise is kept only when it is not doubted but trusted. Hence, God's promises always require faith. Luther's favorite synonym for faith is *fiducia*, trust, because that is precisely what faith is and what it enables us to do, namely, to trust God's promises. Hence, faith must be present if the divine gifts promised are to become the possession of the baptized, for "unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing."[44] It is for this reason that Luther defended the possibility of infant faith and asserted that faith is a gift of baptism.[45] All the other blessings of the sacrament are possible only because of this unique gift. While Luther's stance regarding infant faith was challenged in his own time and continues to be debated in the Christian community in our day, the Reformer insisted that baptism can create faith precisely because Christ is present at and in baptism and is, in fact, the baptizer. And so he inquires: "Since then he is present, speaks, and baptizes, why should not his Word and baptism call forth spirit and faith in the child…?"[46] With Christ all things are possible, and he came into the world so that humans might have faith and thus receive the gifts of salvation and justification which he has won for them. These gifts are promised in baptism, and they become ours because of the faith created through the word of promise in the sacrament.

While baptism is administered only once, its effects and benefits last throughout the life of the believer, and all believers can be assured that their baptism belongs to them.[47] The people of God thus return to their baptism again and again. When *Anfechtungen* or spiritual struggles trouble them, they remember that they have been washed with the waters of baptism and marked with the sign of the cross. When sin, which is not eradicated by baptism,[48] and the "terrors of conscience" manifest themselves, "we must boldly and without fear hold fast to our baptism." Each of us must remind herself or himself: "But I am baptized, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will slay it and blot it out."[49] The daily significance of baptism for each believer's spiritual journey is summarized by Luther in the "Large Catechism": "Thus we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: 'But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.'"[50]

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[43] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,59.

[44] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,59.

[45] See his "Concerning Rebaptism," LW 40,241-46; 254-58 and his "Large Catechism," Book of Concord, 462-64.

[46] "Concerning Rebaptism," LW 40,242-43.

[47] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,151: "Indeed, you should not even pay attention to who baptizes, for baptism does not belong to the baptizer, nor is it given to him, but it belongs to the baptized. It was ordained for him by God, and given to him by God, just as the word of God is not the preacher's (except in so far as he too hears and believes it) but belongs to the disciple who hears and believes it; to him it is given."

[48] "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," LW 35,33-34: "You ask, 'How does baptism help me, if it does not altogether blot out and remove sin?' This is the place for a right understanding of the sacrament of baptism. This blessed sacrament of baptism helps you because in it God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort…. From that hour he begins to make you a new person. He pours into you his grace and Holy Spirit, who begins to slay nature and sin, and to prepare you for death and resurrection at the Last Day. [paragraph] In the second place you pledge yourself to continue in this desire, and to slay your sin more and more as long as you live…. This too God accepts. He trains and tests you all your life

Luther concludes, therefore, that baptism shapes every aspect of the Christian life which should be nothing less than a baptismal journey. Hence, he counsels:

> Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new. If we want to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians, and let those who fall away return to it.[51]

Baptizing is an essential function of ministry, for ministry's purpose is to nurture faith and shape the Christian life.

The third function of the ministerial vocation is the faithful celebration of the Lord's Supper in accordance with Christ's command. While Luther challenged the medieval Western church's sacramental theology, practice and piety, he always considered the Eucharist to be a sacrament, insisted that it be celebrated within the community of faith as Christ had instituted it and ardently defended an evangelical understanding of the mass, both against his Roman opponents and against the Swiss and the Radical reformers. This sacrament thus received a great deal of attention in his writings, and he considered it to be an essential mark of the church[52] as well as a necessary function of ministry.[53] The Eucharist, in which Christ offers His body and blood in and under bread and wine, is a gift to all believers of every place and time. Hence, the function "to consecrate or administer the sacred bread and wine… belongs to all."[54] Of course pastors are again the ones who exercise this function publicly as representatives of Christ and of the community, and they do so for the

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long, with many good works and with all kinds of sufferings. Thereby he accomplishes what you in baptism have desired, namely, that you may become free from sin, die, and rise again at the Last Day, and so fulfill your baptism….For when this does not happen, when we do not suffer and are not tested, then the evil nature gains the upper hand so that a person invalidates his baptism, falls into sin, and remains the same old man he was before."

[49] "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," LW 35,36.

[50] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 462.

[51] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 466.

[52] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,152.

[53] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,24.

[54] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,24.

sake of Christ and the community. It is crucial that the sacrament be celebrated according to Christ's institution, for only then is it administered "rightly."[55] Blessing, proclaiming, distributing and partaking constitute a true and valid Eucharist and a faithful exercise of the sacramental ministry.

As is the case with baptism, the word is the most important part of the Eucharist, though the word must be combined with physical elements in order to constitute a sacrament. The words of Christ with which he promises the gifts of his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins are the "whole power of the mass."[56] Because forgiveness is not simply promised but, in fact, bestowed, the Eucharist is an expression of the gospel. Luther claims, therefore: "Now the mass is part of the gospel; indeed, it is the sum and substance of it. For what is the whole gospel but the good tidings of the forgiveness of sins? Whatever can be said about forgiveness of sins and the mercy of God in the broadest and richest sense is all briefly comprehended in the word of this testament."[57]

The blessings of the sacrament are, therefore, profound. Christ's assurances "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" confirm that forgiveness, life and salvation are given to the believer "because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation."[58] Luther's words are obviously familiar, as are Christ's words. Both are intended to convey a profound truth and to instill absolute peace in the heart of every believer. That is why the celebration of the Lord's Supper is such an essential function of ministry and why a faithful exercise of that function is essential for the spiritual welfare of the individual and the community.

The Reformer is consistent by emphasizing that the gifts promised in the sacrament are efficacious only through faith. As has already been noted in the discussion of baptism, the promises must be trusted if they are to be received. Only faith, no human work, prepares a person for the sacrament and makes her worthy to receive the blessings offered. Hence, Luther assures his readers:

> [W]e conclude that the mass was provided only for those who have a sad, afflicted, disturbed, perplexed and erring conscience, and that they alone commune worthily. For, since the word of divine promise in this sacrament sets forth the forgiveness of sins, let every one draw near fearlessly, whoever he may be, who is troubled by his sins, whether by remorse or by temptation. For this testament of Christ is the one remedy against sins, past, present and future, if you but cling to it with unwavering faith and believe that what the words of the testament declare is freely granted to you.[59]

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[55] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,152.

[56] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,43.

[57] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,56.

[58] Book of Concord, "Small Catechism," 362.

[59] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36, 57. See also "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,38-39: "From the above it will at once be seen what is the right and what is the wrong use of the mass, and what is the worthy and what the unworthy preparation for it. If the mass is a promise, as has been said, then access to it is to be gained, not with any works,

Significantly, the faith that is necessary in order to benefit from the sacrament is, in fact, nourished by the sacrament. When believers come to the table and eat and drink, they receive "food of the soul" that "nourishes and strengthens the new creature." The Supper "is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened."[60] Such spiritual nourishment is necessary because it strengthens faith which, in turn, enables believers to live the new life that is the gift of baptism.

As the gospel is proclaimed in the sacrament and faith is nourished through the gifts of Christ's body and blood, believers are united with Christ and with their fellow saints and enjoy their support in the struggles of life. Luther emphasizes this benefit of the sacrament particularly in his early eucharistic writings which are intended to explore the meaning of the sacrament in light of his emerging evangelical theology. His later eucharistic treatises, whose contents reflect the sacramental conflicts of the Reformation era, do not focus on the theme of unity. The latter is, nevertheless, an important, though neglected, aspect of Luther's eucharistic theology and is explored particularly in his "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," published in 1519. In this treatise the Reformer stresses that through the sacrament Christ and all of his saints become one spiritual body. As a result of this fellowship, "all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament."[61] All sufferings and sins also become common property. Mutual love is awakened and this love, in return, strengthens the fellowship.[62]

The unity created by the sacrament is thus mutually beneficial for the saints as Christ shares all of his gifts with them and takes on all their sins and infirmities while they share all of their gifts with one another and bear each other's burdens. Hence, the Eucharist not only effects and affects the believers' relationship with Christ but also their dealings with each other and the rest of creation. It impacts every aspect of life and strengthens believers as they pursue their varied callings. Faith is nourished by the sacrament and so is love for God and the neighbor. This love manifests itself in willing service.[63] Luther notes

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or powers, or merits of one's own, but by faith alone. For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting man. It is plain therefore, that the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of the promising God, who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy takes the initiative and offers us the word of his promise." See further "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,40-43 and Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 470.

[60] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 469.

[61] "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," LW 35,51.

[62] "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," LW 35,51.

[63] "Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord," LW 38,126: "Where such faith is thus continually refreshed and renewed, there the heart is also at the same time refreshed anew in its love of the neighbor and is made strong and equipped to do all good

that this was clearly the case among the early Christians, who not only gathered together for the communal meal during which they celebrated the sacrament but who also collected food and other material goods which were distributed to those who experienced need, as St. Paul indicates in I Corinthians 11.[64]

The benefits and effects of the sacrament are, of course, intimately related to the gift of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. The eucharistic presence became a volatile and much-debated issue during the sixteenth century as both the Swiss and the Radical reformers affirmed either a symbolic or a spiritual understanding of Christ's presence. While Luther rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation by 1520 and also criticized various other sacramental teachings and practices of the Roman Church, he agreed with the church's affirmation of the real presence and became an ardent defender of Christ's bodily presence, particularly in his conflicts with Huldreich Zwingli and his allies. For Luther, the significance, meaning and efficacy of the sacrament were intimately related to the presence of Christ. The clarity and authority of Scripture and, most importantly, the trustworthiness of Christ's promises were also at stake. Luther thus confessed unflinchingly that the true body and blood of Christ are present in the sacrament "in and under" the bread and wine.[65] Luther's use of prepositions to express the relationship of body and blood to the elements of bread and wine is intentional. While he sought to make a precise confession, he resisted the temptation of attempting to describe or explain the manner of Christ's presence. Thus he insisted that Christ's body and blood are present without seeking to define how they are present. The eucharistic mystery is, therefore, affirmed.

Christ's command and promise as well as Luther's deep appreciation for the Eucharist and its nurturing role in the Christian life explain why the Reformer considered the celebration of this sacrament to be an essential expression of excellence in ministry.

The fourth function of ministry is the exercise of the office of the keys, which is nothing other than the proclamation of God's dialectical word of law and gospel[66]

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works and to resist sin and all temptations of the devil. Since faith cannot be idle, it must demonstrate the fruits of love by doing good and avoiding evil. The Holy Spirit is at hand; he does not let us rest but makes us willing and inclined to do all that is good and earnest and diligent in opposing all that is evil."

[64] "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," LW 35,57.

[65] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 467. See also Book of Concord, "Small Catechism," 362 where Luther only uses the preposition "under." See also the discussions in Günther Gassman and Scott Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 109-22 and in Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism. The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 75-90. Hereafter referred to as Gritsch and Jenson.

[66] "The Keys," LW 40,372-73: "For the key which binds carries forward the work of the law. It is profitable to the sinner inasmuch as it reveals to him his sins, admonishes him to fear God, causes him to tremble, and moves him to repentance, not to destruction. The loosing key carries

and a daily return to baptism. Luther defines the keys as "an office, a power or command given by God through Christ to all of Christendom for the retaining and remitting of the sins of men."[67] The keys, like the preached word and the sacraments, are a mark of the church[68] and an integral aspect of ministry.[69] The persistent reality of sin and its power in the lives of people, even of Christians, and the need of repentance and forgiveness necessitate the keys. Luther describes the institution and purpose of the keys in his treatise "The Keys." The pastoral tone and spiritual focus of Luther's words are readily apparent:

> For the dear Man, the faithful Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, is well aware that his beloved Christians are frail, that the devil, the flesh, and the world would tempt them unceasingly and in many ways, and that at times they would fall into sin. Therefore, he has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and in the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins. Thus aided we should stay on a middle road, between arrogance and faint-heartedness, in genuine humility and confidence, being provided for richly in every way.[70]

It is, of course, the proclamation of the law which prevents arrogance by threatening the unrepentant sinner, and it is the preaching of the gospel which rescues repentant believers from faint-heartedness and engenders both humility and confidence by announcing a divine promise.[71]

The keys save sinners both from arrogance and despair because the pastor's or the Christian sister's or brother's words of binding or loosing have the authority of Christ. Indeed, Christ speaks through the confessor. Christ, therefore, assures every Christian: "If you bind and loose on earth, I will also bind and loose right along with you in heaven. When you use the keys, I will also."[72] Hence, sinners may neither ignore nor doubt the words of a sister or brother. Their words are effective and trustworthy because they are Christ's words and thus convey the truth. Luther insists, therefore, that Christ "binds and joins himself to our work. Indeed, he himself commands us to do his own work."[73]

The "us" refers not only to the clergy, although it includes them as well. Luther is convinced by Matthew 18:15 that Christ has empowered every believer to forgive

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forward the work of the gospel. It invites to grace and mercy. It comforts and promises life and salvation through the forgiveness of sins. In short, the two keys advance and foster the gospel by simply proclaiming these two things: repentance and forgiveness of sins [Luke 24:47]."

[67] "The Keys," LW 40,366.

[68] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,153.

[69] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,25.

[70] "The Keys," LW 40,373.

[71] "The Keys," LW 40,329: "For 'the key which binds,' indeed, is nothing else and can be nothing but a divine threat with which God threatens the hardened sinner with hell. And 'the key which looses' is nothing else and can be nothing but a divine promise with which he promises to the humble sinner the kingdom of heaven."

[72] "The Keys," LW 40,365.

[73] "The Keys," LW 40.365.

and retain sins. It makes no difference whether one is a member of the clerical hierarchy or not. A laywoman, a child, indeed, any Christian can be the voice of Christ for a sister or brother.[74] Thus the Reformer makes the bold assertion: "The keys belong to the whole church and to each of its members, both as regards their authority and their various uses."[75]

Luther insists further that both keys must be exercised and that both have the same purpose, namely, to help sinners "in the attainment of heaven and eternal life" and to grant "righteousness without any merit of works, solely through the forgiveness of sins."[76] Some sinners, even when they are also saints, persist in their sin, refuse to repent and do not desire the assurance of forgiveness. Such people must be addressed with the law and may even be excluded from the community. The goal, however, is not to condemn them but to make them aware of the power of sin in their lives and lead them to repentance. The binding key, therefore, functions "as a wholesome medicine and has a beneficial effect on evil persons, although it is terrifying and annoying to the flesh."[77] On the other hand, there are Christians who are deeply distressed by their sins, whose conscience troubles them and who desperately seek a word of comfort and forgiveness. Such people should be assured of God's grace and love by means of the key that looses.[78] Luther advises that private confession, which he supports heartily, is particularly effective in comforting troubled consciences.[79]

Confession and absolution obviously consist of two parts, the confession inspired by repentance and the assurance of forgiveness. While both are necessary, the latter is the crucial part in which the believer must place all of her trust. This advice of Luther in the Large Catechism is informed both by Scripture and by his extensive personal experience with the church's penitential system. During his monastic years he had struggled mightily to find peace of conscience, especially through the sacrament of penance. However, he failed to do so because he focused on the merits of his own confession rather than the proclamation of good news in the words of absolution. This experience is reflected in his description of confession and absolution in the Large Catechism:

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[74] "The Sacrament of Penance," LW 35,12: "It follows in addition that in the sacrament of penance and forgiveness of guilt a pope or bishop does nothing more than the lowliest priest. Indeed where there is no priest, each individual Christian—even a woman or child—does as much. For any Christian can say to you, 'God forgives you your sins, in the name,' etc., and if you can accept that word with a confident faith, as though God were saying it to you, then in that same faith you are surely absolved."

[75] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,27.

[76] "The Keys," LW 40,328.

[77] "The Keys," LW 40,373.

[78] "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41,153; "The Keys," LW 40,377; Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 476-80.

[79] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,86: "As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences. For when we have laid bare our conscience to our brother and privately made known to him the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother's lips the word of comfort spoken by God himself. And, if we accept this in faith, we find peace in the mercy of God speaking to us through our brother."

> The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work that God does, when he absolves me of my sins through the Word placed on the lips of another person.…We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God's Word. We should not go to confession as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to God, but simply to accept and receive something from him.[80]

God forgives for God's sake because God is gracious, not because of our work or merit.

In order to trust God's promise and to accept the gracious gifts God offers, faith is necessary. This persistent and consistent theme in Luther's theology is emphasized also in his reflections regarding the office of the keys. Faith is necessary, first of all, because true repentance is possible only when faith is actively present. Luther explains in the "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church":

> A contrite heart is a precious thing, but it is found only where there is an ardent faith in the promises and threats of God. Such faith, intent on the immutable truth of God, makes the conscience tremble, terrifies it and bruises it; and afterwards, when it is contrite, raises it up, consoles it, and preserves it. Thus the truth of God's threat is the cause of contrition, and the truth of his promise the cause of consolation, if it is believed.… Therefore faith should be taught and aroused before all else. Once faith is obtained, contrition and consolation will follow inevitably of themselves.[81]

Faith is essential as well because God considers only faith when it comes to matters of forgiveness. That is why believers dare not trust in their own repentance and contrition but only in God's promises. Luther warns, therefore: "Beware then, of putting your trust in your own contrition and of ascribing the forgiveness of sins to your own remorse. God does not look on you with favor because of that, but because of the faith by which you have believed his threats and promises, and which has effected such sorrow within you."[82]

Thirdly, faith is necessary because

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[80] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 478. See also "The Keys," LW 40,364: "Remember that the keys or the forgiveness of sins are not based on our own repentance or worthiness.…On the contrary our repentance and work, our disposition and all we are, should be built on the keys. We are to depend on them with as daring confidence as on God's Word itself. You must never doubt what the keys say and give you, at the risk of losing both body and soul. It is as certain as if God himself were saying so, which indeed he does. It is his own Word and command. But if you doubt the same you make God a liar. You pervert his order and base his keys on your own repentance and worthiness. You should, indeed, repent. But to make repentance the basis of the forgiveness of your sins and of corroborating the work of the keys, is to abandon faith and deny Christ. By means of the key, he will forgive your sins, not for your own sake but for his own name's sake, out of pure grace."

[81] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,84.

[82] "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,85.

it alone enables the believer to trust the promises of God expressed by the keys. The keys require such faith in order to be effective, for faith alone fulfills their expectations by inspiring repentance and trust. Luther therefore assures the believer: "[I]f you believe in their judgment they recover for you the innocence you received in baptism. You will be born anew as a real saint, for God's Word and the keys are holy. They sanctify all who believe in them."[83] Faith, then, is the only prerequisite for the proper exercise and the blessed efficacy of the keys.

It is a great responsibility and privilege to walk with sisters and brothers on their spiritual journey; to hold them accountable for their sin, when necessary; to address them with God's law; to hear their confession; and to speak the radical good news of forgiveness, the word of the gospel, to them. That is precisely the responsibility and privilege of ministry, both of the baptized priests and the ordained pastors, and all believers are called to pursue that pastoral vocation with faithfulness for Christ's sake, for the well-being of our sisters and brothers and for the sake of excellence in ministry.

Proclaiming the living, dynamic word of God, baptizing, celebrating the Holy Supper and carrying out the office of the keys are the chief functions of ministry. They constitute the very essence of this divine vocation because they all have to do with the word of God, with law and gospel. Their faithful exercise constitutes excellence in ministry from Luther's perspective. However, he also identifies other responsibilities of ministry which are now noted briefly.

The fifth function of ministry is to sacrifice. This should not be a surprise since offering sacrifices had traditionally been the vocation of the priesthood. That was surely the case with the priests of the first covenant. The chief responsibility of the medieval church's priesthood was also to offer a sacrifice, namely, the sacrifice of the mass. Indeed, that was the sole function of many priests during the Middle Ages. However, when Luther identified sacrifice as a function of the priesthood, he was affirming neither of these traditions. The sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament were no longer necessary because of Christ's atoning sacrifice, and a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist was totally contrary to the gospel according to Luther.[84] His understanding of sacrifice was formed and normed by his reading of the New Testament. He explains:

> [I]n the New Testament there is no sacrifice except the one which is common to all, namely the one described in Rom 12[:1], where Paul teaches us to present our bodies as a sacrifice, just as Christ sacrificed his body for us on the cross. In this sacrifice he includes the offering of praise and thanksgiving. Peter likewise commands in I Pet 2[:5] that we offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, that is, ourselves, not gold or animals.... [I]n the church there is only this sacrifice, namely, our body.[85]

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[83] "The Keys," LW 40,375.

[84] See Luther's ardent critique of the church's sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist in his "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,51-57.

[85] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,28-29.

Luther's point is clear. Baptized priests, and that includes ordained pastors, are expected to dedicate themselves totally to the service of God which, according to Luther, necessarily includes the service of the neighbor. This calling will be discussed further below.

The sixth function of ministry is to pray. According to Luther, prayer is essential for God's sake, for the sake of others and for our sake. Interestingly and significantly, Luther connects prayer to the second commandment in his discussion of the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism where he explains that God requires us to pray, that is, "to call upon God in every need." This is precisely how we honor God's name, for by "invocation and prayer the name of God is glorified and used to good purpose."[86] When we call on God's name we also address our needs and the needs of others, both spiritual and physical. God is already aware of those needs but wants us to name them so that we might be more open to receive the good things God is prepared to give us.[87] Prayer is, therefore, an affirmation of God's graciousness and generosity. Of course, believers must be truly aware of their need and distress, and earnestness must accompany effective prayers. "Then prayer will come spontaneously, as it should," says Luther, "and no one will need to be taught how to prepare for it or how to create the proper devotion."[88] Christ himself has, of course, taught his followers how to pray by giving them the Lord's Prayer, which is a constant reminder of the need for prayer.[89] God has made it clear in Scripture that God is pleased with our prayers, that God promises to answer our petitions and that we can approach God with confidence.[90] When we pray for others, we have the privilege of becoming mediators and intercessors before God. Thus we emulate Christ himself and are truly priests.[91] Assuming the role of intercessor is thus an essential aspect of excellent ministry.

The seventh function of ministry is to judge doctrine.[92] It is important to note that Luther was not affirming or envisioning some kind of inquisitorial procedure within the community of faith. Indeed, he was very clear that no force is to be used in matters of faith and conscience, only the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, which is alone effective. He also warned that temporal authorities are not to interfere in spiritual concerns.[93] At the same time, the Reformer insisted that faithfulness to the gospel was absolutely essential for the spiritual well-being of God's people, for the mission of the church, for effective ministry, indeed, for God's justifying and sanctifying work in the world. Hence, all the church's preaching, teaching, piety and practices needed to proclaim Christ—*Christum treiben*. Faithful proclamation of the gospel and careful evaluation of doctrine were, therefore, crucial aspects of the priestly vocation, both of the baptized and particularly of the ordained. The baptized needed to be certain that the gospel was preached faithfully, and the ordained needed to be concerned that they proclaimed the good news faithfully. Luther himself sought valiantly to articulate a theology that was consistent with the gospel, and his whole reform program was informed by that gospel. Hence he evaluated and then affirmed or rejected the church's teachings and practices in light of the gospel. Judging doctrine is, therefore, to be expected of every baptized priest, and every priest is able to do so because "a Christian is one who has the Holy Spirit, and who as Christ says, is taught all things by the Spirit [John 14:26]."[94]

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[86] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 441.

[87] Book of Concord, Large Catechism, 444: "God therefore wants you to lament and express your needs and concerns, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and open and spread your apron wide to receive many things."

[88] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 444.

[89] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 444.

[90] Book of Concord, "Large Catechism," 443: "For by his Word, God testifies that our prayer is heartily pleasing to him and will assuredly be heard and granted, so that we may not despise it, cast it to the winds, or pray uncertainly."

[91] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,30.

[92] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,31.

[93] See his "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed," LW 45,93;105-18.

Excellence in ministry requires a faithful identity and a faithful vocation. The latter consists of the faithful exercise of the priestly functions which have all been divinely instituted. There is one more matter that must be considered, however. Excellence in ministry also necessitates a faithful life, and the pursuit of the priestly vocation is only one aspect of that life. Ethical living is the other. Luther was ardently opposed to any Donatist tendencies within the church. He insisted, therefore, that the validity and efficacy of word and sacrament were not dependent on the moral character of the priests, neither the baptized nor the ordained. At the same time, the Reformer knew full well that the morality of both the baptized and particularly of the ordained affects the effective preaching of the gospel. He was also convinced that faith inspires a radically altruistic Christian life. Faithful living is, therefore, also an essential aspect of excellence in ministry. The Reformer explicated his vision of the Christian or priestly life in one of his most attractive and significant treatises, "The Freedom of a Christian."

Luther begins the treatise with the dialectical thesis: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[95] He then supports both parts of the thesis in the remainder of the treatise.

"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." This statement describes reality according to Luther because the Holy Spirit has created faith in the Christian through the proclamation of the gospel, which is alone necessary for Christian living.[96] Faith then accomplishes wondrous things in and for the justified person. The first benefit of faith is that it makes the law unnecessary. Luther explains:

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[94] "Concerning the Ministry," LW 40,33.

[95] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,344.

[96] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,345: "One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ…[I]t is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory and of every incalculable blessing."

> It is clear, then, that a Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law….This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation.[97]

Even as it makes the law unnecessary, faith actually fulfills the law because it keeps the first commandment by considering God to be truthful and trustworthy, thereby giving God the greatest honor. "The very highest worship of God is this," claims Luther, "that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted."[98] When God sees that through faith we give God honor, God honors us by considering us to be truthful and righteous because of our faith. Considering God to be truthful and just is, in fact, being truthful and just.[99] Luther concludes, therefore, that "faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments, for he who fulfils the First Commandment has no difficulty fulfilling all the rest."[100]

The third benefit of faith is that it unites the believer with Christ. Luther uses the analogy of marriage in describing this union and draws the conclusion that as a result of this "true marriage" a *fröhlicher Wechsel*, a "happy exchange," occurs. All that belongs to Christ is now the believer's, and all that belongs to the believer is now Christ's. It is a happy exchange from the believer's perspective because of its beneficial effects. Luther explains:

> Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?[101]

The Christian liberty that faith brings is truly radical, for believers are freed from the law, sin, death and damnation, and they receive grace, life and salvation because they are united with Christ. There is no greater freedom.

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[97] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,349-50.

[98] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,350.

[99] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,351: God "does us that great honor of considering us truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith. Faith works truth and righteousness by giving God what belongs to him. Therefore God in turn glorifies our righteousness. It is true and just that God is truthful and just, and to consider and confess him to be so is the same as being truthful and just."

[100] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,353.

[101] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,351.

Because he has united himself with them through faith, Christ also grants his people his kingship and priesthood. "Hence all of us who believe in Christ are priests and kings in Christ," claims Luther, "as I Pet 2[:9] says: 'You are a chosen race, God's own people, a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.'"[102] The Reformer also explains the nature of the believer's royal and priestly character. As royalty the Christian is lord over all things so that nothing can harm her.[103] Of course, that royal status has nothing to do with physical power or authority because it is spiritual. For this reason, the believer's power is "a truly omnipotent power, a spiritual dominion in which there is nothing so good and nothing so evil but that it shall work together for good," if the Christian only believes.[104]

Through the gift of faith, created and nurtured by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, Christians are absolutely free.

The priesthood which is Christ's gift to the believer is an even greater blessing than that of being "the freest of kings."[105] As priests, Christians "are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things."[106] The divine things that Luther is, no doubt, envisioning are the word and the sacraments, which are the gracious gifts that God is eager to grant God's people.

Through the gift of faith, created and nurtured by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, Christians are absolutely free. All the powers which can imprison them spiritually and take away life have been conquered. Believers have been united with Christ and share all of his blessings. How is it possible, then, that such radically free people can also be "perfectly dutiful servants, subject to all"? That is precisely the divine paradox, according to Luther. Christians have been freed in order to be servants. Since they have already been emancipated by Christ, they are not required to do anything to free themselves. Hence, they are free to focus on others and to serve them. That is their blessed vocation, and it should not surprise them. After all, one aspect of their freedom is their unity with Christ, the creator and ruler of the universe and the great high priest. Yet he took on human flesh and walked on this earth in order to become humanity's servant. His calling is now the calling of all Christians, precisely because they are people of faith.

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[102] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,354.

[103] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,354

[104] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,355.

[105] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,355.

[106] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,355.

Faith is the great Christian liberty, but it is also the power within believers that motivates them to serve others because faith is quite naturally and necessarily active in love. Hence, it inspires Christians to do all kinds of good works that serve God and the neighbor. Luther celebrates the dynamic nature of faith in this passage from his "Prefaces to the New Testament":

> O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them.[107]

While good works are not a prerequisite for faith and surely do not justify, they are a natural consequence of faith and, thus, necessary. Faith comes first, however, and then good works follow. These were revolutionary ideas in Luther's day, and they are still radical in our time. According to Luther, good works are not motivated by a fear of God, a desire to achieve merit and to be able to bargain with God, or a sense of self-satisfaction. Rather, Christian ethical behavior is a reflection of the believer's existence *coram deo*,[108] and good works are inspired by faith which is manifest in love of God and the neighbor.

While this is not Luther's chief focus, he does point out that their good works benefit believers themselves. Good works are, in fact, a spiritual exercise by means of which the sinful nature, "the flesh" in St. Paul's terminology, is disciplined. The flesh is purified of evil inclinations and lusts by means of such works, and it, together with the spirit, then becomes an instrument of God.[109] As good works curb the doer's sinful inclinations, they also serve as an example to others who must discipline the flesh.[110] Most importantly, however, faith inspires good works so that God and the neighbor are served or, more precisely, so that God is served through the service of the neighbor in the "freedom of love."[111] As people who enjoy radical freedom, Christians are concerned about only one thing, namely, how they may benefit and serve others. "This is a truly Christian life," asserts Luther. "Here faith is truly active through love [Gal 5:6], that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith."[112] When Christians exercise this servant role they are, of course, emulating Christ himself.[113] In light of Philippians

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[107] "Prefaces to the New Testament," LW 35,370.

[108] Gritsch and Jenson, 137-39.

[109] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,358-60.

[110] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,369: "Each one should do the works of his profession and station, not that by them he may strive after righteousness, but that through them he may keep his body under control, be an example to others who also need to keep their bodies under control, and finally that by such works he may submit his will to that of others in the freedom of love."

[111] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,369.

[112] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,365.

[113] Luther notes that Christ can become an example for Christians only after they have accepted Him as gift. This is a

2:5-8, Luther points out that although Christ was God, he came into our world not to exercise power over us but to be one of us and to experience all that we experience. He lived his life and pursued his redemptive work as our servant, and all that he accomplished as our servant is now ours.[114] In the same way, argues Luther, "we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become, as it were, a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians."[115] As "Christs to one another," people of faith also seek to serve all, without making any distinctions or drawing any boundaries. They do not consider whether their service is received with gratitude or ingratitude; whether they are praised or not; whether they benefit through their service or not; whether the one who is served is friend or foe. Such generous and profligate service is reminiscent of God's generosity who makes the sun shine on the evil and the good [Matthew 5:45].[116]

The Reformer summarizes his whole argument in the "The Freedom of a Christian" in the following passage. That passage also serves as a concise statement of his vision of the Christian life, which is the truly faithful life that all the baptized priests are called to live.

> We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself

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crucial point because the Reformer insists that Christ must first be Savior before He can be an example. He explores this distinction in his "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," LW 35,119-20. This is a marvelously rich passage which clarifies not only the two roles of Christ but also confirms the intimate relationship between faith and works. Luther notes: "The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you. On this you may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself; indeed, as if you were Christ himself. See, this is what it means to have a proper grasp of the gospel, that is, of the overwhelming goodness of God, which neither prophet, nor apostle, nor angel was ever able fully to express, and which no heart could adequately fathom or marvel at. This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content. This is what preaching the Christian faith means. This is why such preaching is called gospel, which in German means a joyful, good, and comforting 'message'; and this is why the apostles are called the 'twelve messengers.'…Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. See, there faith and love move forward, God's commandment is fulfilled, and a person is fearless to do and to suffer all things. Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian."

[114] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,366.

[115] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,367-68.

[116] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,367

> into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet, he always remains in God and in his love….[117]

The freedom to love God and the neighbor and to express that love in willing service characterizes the faithful life of all baptized priests. This freedom to love is a practical confirmation that the faith that gives Christians their baptismal identity as priests and that informs all of the functions of their ministerial vocation also shapes their lives, lived in an intimate relationship with God and with the neighbor. The circle is thus complete. Faithful identity leads to a faithful vocation which is, in turn, pursued in context of a faithful life. All three are necessary components of excellence in ministry.

One more point needs to be made in support of the thesis that has been argued, namely, that excellence in ministry consists of faithfulness. It has become apparent during the course of this exploration of Luther's thought that from the Reformer's perspective ministry is ultimately about God's work, not ours. When the word is proclaimed, the sacraments are celebrated, sins are forgiven and retained, sacrifices are offered, prayers are raised and doctrines are evaluated, God is at work. According to Luther, every priest, whether baptized or ordained, must say to herself or himself and to those who are the recipients of her or his ministry: "What I do, I do not by my own authority, but in the name and stead of God, so that you shall regard it just as if our Lord himself had done it in a visible manner. The Doer and the minister are different persons, but the work of both is the same work, or rather, it is the work of the Doer alone, through my ministry."[118] In his "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests," the Reformer is quite specific in asserting God's activity through the ministry of God's people. He insists:

> For we must believe and be sure of this, that baptism does not belong to us but to Christ, that the gospel does not belong to us but to Christ, that the office of preaching does not belong to us but to Christ, that the sacrament [of the Lord's Supper] does not belong to us but to Christ, that the keys, or forgiveness and retention of sins, do not belong to us but to Christ. In summary, the offices and sacraments do not belong to us but to Christ, for he has ordained all this and left it behind as a legacy in the church to be exercised and used to the end of the world; and he does not lie or deceive us. Therefore, we cannot make anything else out of it but must act according to his command and hold to it. However, if we alter it or improve on it, then it is invalid and Christ is no longer present, nor is his ordinance.[119]

Martin Luther insisted that ministry is not about us and our accomplishments. It ultimately consists of doing God's work. Thus there is much at stake, and no vocation is more important than this one. It is precisely for this reason that faithfulness is the ultimate criterion for determining excellence in ministry. This seems so obvious, but it is so crucial. In order for God's work to be done, God's people must do it because in God's surprising wisdom God has chosen to work through means. Thus God's work will be done when those whom God has chosen to be God's instruments pursue their calling faithfully. It is as simple and profound as that. This means, of course, that God's people, the baptized priests and the ordained and consecrated leaders of the church, cannot determine what to do and how to do it. They dare not decide to "improve" God's call. God's people must do what God has called them to do, and they must do it as God intends it to be done, namely, as Christ has commanded and modeled. In short, they must be faithful so that the word they proclaim is truly the gospel, the sacraments they celebrate and share are divine gifts of life, the word of forgiveness they speak is God's word of assurance, the prayers they offer are addressed to God, the doctrines they teach are consistent with God's radical good news and the life they live reflects Christ's wondrous serving love. God is faithful, and God's faithfulness is manifest especially in God's word, in baptism, in the Supper, in the good news of forgiveness and newness of life and in love expressed in tangible ways. God's faithfulness will be experienced particularly when God's priests exercise their vocation faithfully. Then their ministry will, indeed, be excellent.

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[117] "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31,371.

[118] "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36,63.

[119] "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests," LW 38,200.

> Martin Luther insisted that ministry is not about us and our accomplishments. It ultimately consists of doing God's work.

Kitchen Drama

Heidi Neumark

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I was having breakfast with Jesus recently. When I mispronounced his name as Jesus, Jesus corrected me. Jesus has quite a few Latin Kings tattoos. Which made sense when he told me his story. His mother died when he was born, and he was put with foster parents who were Latin King gang members who preyed on his vulnerability in multiple ways. One night at dinner, when Jesus was 13, he told his foster mother that he was gay, and she stabbed him with her fork. Hard. He has a row of scar bumps on his arm and another on his side from the fork attack. Jesus ran away and survived one way or another until he found his way to Trinity Place, the shelter my congregation opened a year and a half ago for homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. Some, like Jesus, have lived a lifetime of trauma. Others are kicked out of previously stable homes after coming out.

We offer transitional housing for ten young adults and the biggest drama often centers around the kitchen. Whose dirty dishes are those in the sink? Who cleaned the dishes but left food scraps in the sink? Who cleaned the dishes but left food scraps all over the stove? Who hid the dirty pot in the back of the fridge? Who plugged up the sink by pouring grease down the drain? Who left the crumbs and bits of jelly on the counter? Who left the stinky garbage open? Who put the regular garbage in the recycling container? This is why we have roaches. This is an open invitation to the rat population more evident than ever due to the construction site next door. Not to mention mice. If that kitchen is not cleaned, no one is going to get their metrocards, the free subway passes we give out once a week like prizes to those who follow the purity laws. It seems counterproductive to withhold laundry money. Ah the joys of ministry! Perfect potential indeed!

This kitchen drama is an old story. Jesus faced a lot of conflict over the issue of purity rules around food. Jesus was frequently criticized for defiling the kitchen and dining areas. In fact, in the first half of chapter 7 in Mark's gospel, the chapter from which our reading comes, Jesus is criticized because his disciples have not washed their hands properly (ah, there's another issue, but now we have installed new soap dispensers). Another concern brought before Jesus is, and I quote, "the proper washing of cups, pots and bronze kettles," verse 4.

This is all in the first half of chapter 7. Our text follows in the second half. To get there, Jesus travels a good 100 miles out of his way into the region of Tyre–into the heart of unclean territory. All the Lysol in the world couldn't sanitize Tyre. When Jesus arrives, he enters a house and wants to be left in peace. Maybe he wanted a little recovery time after dealing with so many kitchen nightmares. But we're told that Jesus could not escape notice. So much for peace. Before he's even had time for a nap, in comes a woman who bows down at his feet. Mark wants to make it very clear just what sort of woman she is. Now the woman was a Gentile, we are told and if that's not enough, there's more. She's a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin.

So, a pagan unclean by birth, a foreigner, female and untouchable because her little daughter had an unclean spirit. Her bowing down is intended as a gesture of respect, but it would have been seen as a shameful act. This woman should never have approached Jesus in the first place. She knows it, but she doesn't accept it. She imagines what for others is unimaginable. Mark magnifies the obstacles. All that would make the woman's efforts futile. But like Mary, this woman magnifies the Lord. Like Mary who envisioned the seismic shifting of alliances in her womb, this mother envisions a transformation those around her cannot see, that her voice will be heard and taken seriously, that her daughter will be made well.

She bends down before Jesus because she loves her daughter and because she believes that Jesus has the potential to do what none other can. It is a posture of hope and of risk at the same time. A posture familiar to many. She bent down as Lilia bent down, lifting her children through the barbed wire, over the border to reach a place with potential for her young children's future. She showed me the dark scars on her thigh and said that in Mexico she could earn 250 pesos a week. Diapers cost seventy. Shampoo costs thirty. "You can wash or you can eat," she said. And so they pushed themselves through the barbed wire fence. She said that she didn't even feel it cutting her at the time. The scars came later. And other barbs. My daughter once came home from high school and told me that some girls were talking disparagingly about DMs. DMs? She was told it meant "Dirty Mexicans."

Dirty Mexicans. She-males. Unclean *syrophoenisnas.* A mother enters the house where Jesus was, crossing a threshold as forbidding as any *frontera.* And once there, she begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, *Let the children be fed first for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it the dogs.*

What happened to Jesus the beautiful Savior, Jesus and his sweet, sweet spirit? Some say Jesus didn't mean what he said, but was just quoting a proverb and testing the woman to see her reaction. Other commentators say, well, Jesus doesn't really call her a dog. The Greek word should really be translated as puppy. In fact, the Spanish translation of the Bible I have does that, instead of dog, *perro*, the translation reads *perrito,* puppy.

Frankly, whether she's referred to as a big dog or a little dog, a street dog or a house pet, it's degrading, Like being called a DM or one of the insulting names hurled at the youth in our shelter. Dog was an insult used to put down gentiles, a dehumanizing term and as we know still today, the violence, on all sides in the Middle East and elsewhere, violence against immigrants and queer youth is often made possible precisely by the prior act of dehumanization and demonization. How could Jesus have been part of this?

Was he over-tired? That certainly lowers my excellence quotient. After all, the woman interrupted him right after he'd had an exhausting trip which came after dealing with non-stop conflict and non-stop needs with a number of encounters with the demonic thrown in. It's only been seven chapters, not seven years, but maybe it was time for Jesus to take a sabbatical. Or maybe there's another explanation.

After his first response, Jesus shows that he respects the woman's boldness in talking back to him and standing her ground. In the end Jesus hears her cry and takes it to heart and heals her child. It appears that Jesus allowed this woman to open his mind to further potential for mission and ministry, that Jesus changed his mind. But Jesus chose to go to Tyre. Wasn't his mind already open? Yes, already, but maybe also, not yet.

Is that a heretical thought? Well, we confess that Jesus was human, that he had to learn to talk and walk like all babies. Martin Luther liked to remind folks that even Jesus' diapers were smelly and needed changing. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. In other words, Jesus grew stronger in body and in mind. From the very beginning, many people found this offensive and could not imagine that God could be subject to these kinds of human limitations, but that indeed is the scandal and miracle of incarnation; we confess God become flesh.

In doing so, Jesus set aside equality with God as a thing to be grasped. Jesus emptied himself. Jesus abandoned the perfections of glory for the imperfections and limitations of flesh and blood. Jesus let go of perfect clarity for the struggles of seeing through a glass darkly. Is it possible that Jesus wasn't born with everything perfectly figured out; that Jesus didn't have all the answers? He couldn't even ask WWJD. Well, the Word says that he grew in strength and wisdom. The Wisdom of the world needed to grow in wisdom? But that's the paradox we embrace, bread yet body of Christ , human yet divine, scarred yet whole. The Gospels give us a number of examples where Jesus struggles. We had one on Sunday, Jesus wrestling with the devil's various temptations. Before long, we'll come to Jesus in the garden, anguishing over his ministry, and Jesus on the cross, where every ounce of perfect potential drains out of him. Like a dog left to die on a garbage dump. His crown of thorns sharp as barbed wire.

Perhaps the encounter with the woman in today's gospel is another such instance. Perhaps Jesus had hesitations in his own mind about crossing the boundaries he was crossing, worrying, as we do at times, if all hell will break loose if we break with certain long-held practices and policies.

Perhaps Jesus was struggling with a ministry and mission that led him into uncharted territory, another form of wilderness where even Jesus was tempted with second thoughts. After all, his previous encounter with Gentiles was not all that encouraging. He healed the Geresene demoniac, and folks responded by asking Jesus to please leave the neighborhood. Plenty of fodder for second thoughts.

Like we might get. Diversity is not easy. Maybe it wasn't easy for Jesus either! Isn't that a comfort: it wasn't easy for Jesus either! Jesus knows all about our troubles and struggles and our second thoughts.

But if the story ended there, it would just be business as usual. The thing is, it doesn't end there. I have come to believe that we can thank the Syrophoenician woman for the diverse, universal nature of the church. Because she crossed the border, bowing down in risk and hope, speaking a bold prophetic word. It appears to be enough to clear up any lingering doubts in Jesus' mind about the direction of his ministry. Of course, Jesus had to give up equality with God, omniscience, to empty himself and listen to her, a perfect model for us.

Did this make Jesus more successful? I suppose it depends on whom you would ask. A brilliant success according to the Syrophoenician woman and her little girl. But not everyone saw it that way. Instead of transfiguration, many saw defilement. Instead of triumph, they focused on, well, dirty dishes. They just didn't really see the wonders right before their eyes.

What about us? In spite of our own kitchen nightmares, we do see glimpses of perfect potential shining through. There is Robin who just went back to college after her winter break. When the dorm closes, home is back at the church. Robin is four months away from completing her first year of college, a transgendered young woman living in a college dorm who reports that her biggest struggle this year has been calculus. Her potential is incalculable. Cristy voluntarily washed the dishes for Nanci last week; that was a wonder. Peaches and Jesus almost came to blows over precious minutes in the only shower, but they restrained themselves, showing some excellent self-control. Some of the Mexican women of the church, mostly undocumented, cooked chicken in molé for the young people. Undocumented Mexicans and gays, now there's a winning ticket. After dinner, Kenny, who needed reconstructive facial surgery after a hate attack, said: "This is the only place I feel human."

There's a glimpse of perfect potential. You have your own list of glimpses too. Of church as it should be. Our better selves. The world charged with the grandeur of God. Then there's the other list. The crumbs on the counter, the clogged toilet, the youth who must be discharged if he refuses to attend anger management classes, the space-use conflicts, the cracked boiler, a new unwelcome addition to my list, a reminder of deeper fissures. You have that list too. It's the list of our potential for failure, which frequently looms larger than our potential for perfection. We just confessed it on Ash Wednesday. And yet, like the heroine in our gospel, we hope and take risks for healing, and not only for our blood kin. The mark of ash on our foreheads is transformed in the bright mark of baptismal oil.

On the baptism of Jesus, Jesus was baptized. Yes he was. He couldn't control the tears ahead of time. Tears because there was no mother, no father, no sibling, no partner at his side. Lydie, our council president stood with him. I poured the water and said the words of baptism and prayed that Jesus would hear another voice as well: *You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.* I marked his forehead with oil. *Jesus you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.* I prayed that, no matter what happened, Jesus would hold on to the promise of his namesake. *You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.*

You are beloved of God and with you God is well pleased. That promise will see us through a lot of failure. Before the perfection. Right now. As we are. Perfectly pleasing to God beyond any calculus. Perfectly loved by God who sees in us what we cannot. Glory. Glory be. Thanks be to God.

Sisters Act

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LSTC Leadership Conference
Perfect Potential: Seeking Excellence in Ministry
Texts: Numbers 27:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-19

My certificate of ordination is dated Feb.12, 1983. 25 years ago today.

But there was a huge snow storm that day, so I was actually ordained on Feb. 13th, twenty-five years ago. It means a lot to me to share this time with all of you fellow travelers, and it makes me feel a bit nostalgic. A couple of years before my ordination, I was assigned to a church in Jersey City, NJ for my internship. At that time, the church and my apartment were in a run-down section of the city. One day, my mother came to visit with a member of her church on their way back from something in Manhattan. My mother told me later that in the car on the way home, the woman had turned to my mother and said, "Don't worry Barbara. She'll get something better before long." My mother replied, "I don't think that she's looking for that kind of better."

What kind of better are we looking for? Which passions that we start out with stay with us all the way? Which ones do we discard or just give up on?

Do we settle for less than we hoped for? After one, five, ten or twenty-five years? My favorite text about settling—or not—is the one just read from the book of Numbers. It's a story rich in promise for congregations and church leaders, but, sadly, it's not in our lectionary, and that means that for most folks in our churches, its riches remain hidden away.

The story begins with a gathering of tribes. On the one hand, it was a time for giving thanks and celebration. The people have come out of the wilderness to stand at its very edge, on the plains of Moab, with the land towards which they have been traveling for so long now within sight on the other side of the Jordan River, and now they need to reorganize in order to settle on the land that stretches before them.

But they face a new danger. The danger is that when the sojourners settle, well, the danger is just that: that they will settle, settle for something less than the vision and hope for liberation and justice that sent them forth in the first place, settle for a watered-down version as they make their way across the river. When Nelson Mandela spoke to his nation, on the threshold of reorganizing to build their new future, he said:

> Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am

> I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.... [W]e are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And it's not just in some of us. It's in everyone.

But our ancestors who entered the land did play small and settle for less. They settled for their own well-being as a group and neglected the further, fully liberating command to be a light for all nations. They settled as possessors who overlooked the dispossessed and disconnected and found themselves exiled from the very land they once entered with such expectation. But there were some brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous exceptions who can show us a more excellent way.

The sojourners begin their reorganization for life across the Jordan River by taking a census. It turns out that Numbers is full of numbers!

The sojourners begin their reorganization for life across the Jordan River by taking a census. It turns out that Numbers is full of numbers! The census is tightly organized. Each of the twelve tribes is named and each tribe has three to six clans, each with its own patriarch who is named. So in addition to the census numbers, we get the names of the twelve tribes...plus about sixty other names of clan heads. The Bible only gives the total figures for each tribe. I used a calculator to add them up for the total, 601,730 people, none named besides the tribal and clan heads.

But, in fact, the group gathered on the plains of Moab is much bigger because the census does not include women and children. This is because the first purpose of the census is to determine battle readiness, and only men counted for that. The second purpose of the census was to determine how the land would be distributed, more land to larger clans, less land to smaller ones. Since women and children were not permitted to own property, being property themselves, they didn't need to be counted.

Given the context, none of this is particularly surprising. What is absolutely astonishing is that when you move through the list of tribes and come to the eighth tribe, the tribe of Manasseh, you read along: *The descendants of Manasseh: of Machir, the clan of the Machirites; and Machir was the father of Gilead; of Gilead, the clan of the Gileadites. These are the descendants of Gilead: of Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites; and of Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; and of Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites; and of Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaites; and of Hepher, the clan of the Hepherites.* No wonder this isn't in the lectionary. But then you hit verse 33: *Now Zelophehad, son of Hepher, had no sons, but daughters: and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were* ***Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah****;*

then the census goes on its humdrum way as if nothing has happened.

The whole boring pattern that has been droning on and on for verse after verse, year after year, century after century for almost two millennia in the Ancient Near East is interrupted! ! It splits wide open like the Red Sea; it splits wide open like an old wine skin that can't hold this new wine, and a new word of liberation comes pouring through. *Now Zelophehad,son of Hepher, had no sons, but daughters…*(we don't hear about any other person and whether or not he had any sons. Surely Zelophehad wasn't the only man in this unfortunate position)…*and the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were* ***Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah***. The text makes a point of pointing out the names—the names of the daughters.

Now the reason I bothered to add up all the census numbers is because the more I added, the more amazed I became. The more I added, the bigger the miracle becomes. Because when you add it all up you come to the amazing result that out of 601,730, only six people are named who are not clan heads and five of them are women. And you realize that the man is only named because of the five women. Five named women in a census that didn't even count women in the first place. How did this happen?

We find out the moment the census is over. *Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward.* **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah** were standing there on the plains of Moab with everyone else about to take possession of the promised land, but they realized that the system and its policies were set up in such a way that some folks were going to be left out of the promise from the very start.

Whatever glorious inheritance was about to be celebrated, it didn't include **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.** Their father had died on their sojourn in the wilderness. If they had been sons, they would have inherited his portion of the land. If they had had brothers, they would have been able to share in their brothers' land. If they had been married, they would have gone to live on their husband's land. If they had been widowed, their husband's family would have taken care of them. But being as they had no father, no brother, no husband and no in-laws, they had no rights to any land. Now they were together with their people on the edge of the wilderness, but when everyone crossed over, they would remain forever on the far edge—disconnected from land and from sustainable life.

There was no forum for **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah** to voice their grievance. Women had no authority to enter the public sphere, much less to speak there. As women without men, they had the most to lose if the community rejected them, and rejection was quite likely if they acted outside the system. Even Moses' own sister Miriam was censured for daring to question her brother's judgment as God's spokesperson. *"Has the Lord spoken only through Moses, has he not spoken through us also?"* she dared to ask (Num 12). The reaction was that Miriam became covered with leprosy and had to be shut away for a week-long time in order to learn her lesson. This was not an encouraging example for **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.** They were expected to play small—to settle without an inheritance.

But these five sisters, with no precedent, no rights, no authority and no testosterone, go ahead and take action regardless. These brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous sisters decide that their playing small will not serve the world. They decide that they will not settle. It would have been far less risky to approach Moses in private and plead with him to work out some special deal for them, but these sisters are not simply trying to get a piece of the pie for themselves; that's still playing small. No, because they go public, their petition becomes an action to effect change on behalf of the whole community. They go forward to meet Moses right at the entrance of the tent of meeting in the presence of Eleazer the priest, the leaders and all the congregation. You can bet that everyone was listening. "Our father died in the wilderness…and he had no sons…. Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." To do that would require major policy changes in Israel's bureaucracy.

The lectionary doesn't recognize these women, but we know that the church can be slower than the rest of society to catch on to some things.

Because **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah** present their petition to Moses in public, their individual case will serve to change the Israelite inheritance law to include women, a law that has been on the books for centuries in a system that denied female land rights for virtually 2000 years (and that's longer than the ELCA's been around), and these five audacious women are trying to change it in a court that doesn't even allow their presence, much less their voice. But the same spirit that must have gotten hold of them seemed to be at work in Moses too, because instead of striking them down with leprosy and sending them to their rooms without supper, Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: *"The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.…It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses."*

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and **Tirzah** filed one of the earliest lawsuits on record. In fact, this case has been named as the oldest case that is still cited as an authority. In the American Bar Association Journal of Feb. 1924, there is an article citing this case and describing it as an early declaratory judgment in which the property rights of women are clearly set forth.

The lectionary doesn't recognize these women, but we know that the church can be slower than the rest of society to catch on to some things, too often the tail light rather than the headlight, as Martin Luther King said.

But how did these sisters come to imagine that they were powerful beyond measure when their plight was invisible to the multitudes of 601,730, actually over a million considering the other women, and their situation didn't count for anything in the numbers census? Well, there can only be one explanation. Somebody knew the trouble they'd seen. Somebody knew their names. Somebody had counted every hair on their five beautiful heads. The same Somebody who came on the scene in the midst of another census and was only greeted by a few no-count shepherds. The same Somebody who doesn't count things up the way our treasurers sometimes do, the one who *didn't count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him.… In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance.*

Sometimes when we add up all we're up against, all the challenges before us, all the work that lies ahead, all the problems and the decisions, the heartaches and heart breaks,all the downright evil we face, and then we add up what we've got, well, sometimes it can seem a bit discouraging. It can seem that we may as well play it small and settle. It can happen in the first year of a first call or in the 25th. I'm not saying that numbers don't matter, but according to the book of Numbers, which ought to know something about numbers, they matter less than one might think when you factor in the immeasurable greatness of God's power.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and **Tirzah** didn't settle for less than their glorious inheritance, and there were only five of them. But five is not one. "Wherever two or three are gathered," said Jesus, "there am I in their midst." Which is why we are here together. Which is why these connections here are so important. I don't know most of you—where in your sojourn you are and what kind of better you are looking for. But if and when you or I are tempted to settle and play small in ways that don't serve the church or the world, I like to repeat this mantra: **Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah Milcah, Tirzah..**

As Mandela said: don't ask yourself *who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.…[W]e are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And it's not just in some of us. It's in everyone.*

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ…may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation…so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe…*AMEN. (Ephesians 1:17ff)

Book Reviews

Christian Education as Evangelism. How and Why Christian Education Relates to Evangelism. Edited by Norma Cook Everist. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 163 Pages. Paper. $25.

This book is written by Christian Education professors at Lutheran seminaries of the ELCA and ELCIC. All of them are at pains to make the case that Christian Education is evangelism. Evangelism or witness is only one of the functions of the church. There are four others in addition to education: worship, service, fellowship, and stewardship. Why all the attention to witness to the exclusion of the others? Is it a perceived notion that witness is the most important function for a stalemated church?

The most interesting chapters are those which report experiences of Christian Education as evangelism. Mary Hughes reports the experiences of three Ohio congregations while Eddie Kwok reports on education in a multicultural situation with Chinese people in Canada. Nelson Strobel reports on his experience in a parochial elementary school in New York and makes the case for church schools also at the secondary and higher education levels.

The remaining chapters are split between an emphasis on evangelism and education. Education, Diane Hymans says, helps people to understand what something means. Understanding moves from facts to what the facts mean. Education focuses on understanding the gospel and how the gospel shapes who we are and how we live our lives. Mary Hess uses the work of Keagan and Lacey to describe language that transforms. The first language is “From Complaint to Commitment.” The second personal language is “From Blame to Personal Responsibility.” The third language is “From New Year’s Resolutions to Competing Commitments.” And the fourth is “From Assumptions that Hold Us to Assumptions We Hold.” The three social languages are: “From Prizes and Praising to Ongoing Regard”; “From Rules and Policies to Public Agreement”; “From Constructive to Deconstructive Criticism.” As helpful as these languages are, Hess barely indicates how they are related to Christian Education.

Norma Everist offers a four-stage approach to the education of people. First: Who are the people among whom we are called to teach? What daily language do they speak? Second: How are people interpreting what they hear? Third: Beyond the church doors: where do people go to carry out their mission and ministry? Fourth: How are people hearing the gospel that members live and speak?The emphasis on the language of daily living is very helpful. Susan McArver observes that the ELCA 2007 Social Statement on Education states that Lutherans have a rich heritage of education upon which to draw: the statement posits a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the concept of education connected with both faith and world; it states that Lutherans support public education; the statement addresses the church and its institutions rather than the church’s response to society; and the statement indicates that education often leads to evangelism.

Margaret Krych uses Paul Tillich as one of her primary sources. Tillich says that there are three primary functions of the church: missions, education and evangelism. Oddly enough, he speaks of evangelism as that which is directed to disaffected church members. Carol Jacobsen’s emphasis is on living outside oneself for God and the neighbor as the impetus for evangelism. Donald Just’s emphasis is on making evangelism not just another program of the church. Phyllis Kersten’s contribution is on women hearing in their own language and men hearing in theirs. Kristine Lund targets young adults and how to reach them in cyberspace. As the reader can see, the emphasis in these five chapters is on evangelism. Education is secondary.

I would entitle the book, “Christian Education and Evangelism”and be rid of the implication that Christian Education and Evangelism are the same thing. Evangelism is the proclamatiom of the Gospel to those who have not heard it. Christian Education helps believers understand what is believed.

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Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark. Edited by Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. xvi and 239 pages. Cloth. $35.00.

This is a collection of ten essays written in honor of Werner Kelber for his groundbreaking work over several decades in the area of gospel narrative, orality and literacy, and memory. As is the case with collections of this kind, the essays are not all on the same level and are pertinent to the theme by various degrees.

The reader looking for a book on Mark should be warned that only three of the ten essays deal directly with the earliest Gospel. In an engaging piece, Whitney Shiner's "Memory Technology and the Composition of Mark," after describing several ancient models for memorization and composition of oral and written works, demonstrates how Mark's structure was composed. Richard Horsley's "A Prophet like Moses and Elijah: Popular Memory and Cultural Patterns in Mark" suggests that one must look to the "little tradition" of nonliterate ordinary people, as well as the written texts of the Hebrew Bible, for their influence upon the composition of Mark. Vernon Robbins' "Interfaces of Orality and Literature in Mark" compares the different ways the evangelists handle the John the Baptist narrative and the rejected stone saying of Mark, noting the difference between internal and external voices.

Holly Hearon introduces this volume with an overview of contributions to the study of orality and the gospels in the wake of Kelber's work. Jens Schröter in a general survey of the New Testament canon reminds the reader of the open character of Scripture in the early church. Several writers show insights from listening to the voice of South Slavic Bards (John Miles Foley), Philostratus' *Heroikos* (Ellen Bradshaw Aitken), or the South African prophet George Khambule (Jonathan Draper). Martin Jaffee's essay "Gender and Otherness in Rabbinic Oral Culture: On Gentiles, Undisciplined Jews, and Their Women" is a thematic survey of passages concerning those banned from study of oral Torah. Most of these essays will be helpful primarily to scholars and graduate students, as also Jan Assmann's theoretical essay "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory."

The general reader wishing an introduction to the topic would be better served by Werner Kelber's own *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983).

Fred Strickert
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The Shape of the Gospel. New Testament Essays. By Robert Tannehill. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007. 237 pages. Paper. $28.00.

The author, a respected scholar currently Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, is interested in the significance of literary forms in the gospels and with the narrative structure of Mark, along with two helpful chapters on Paul—though the book title is more general.

Much of the early chapters exhibits his attempt to categorize the literary forms in the gospels, with chapter four serving as a scholarly summary of his work and so not as useful for pastors. Chapter six argues that Matt 5:48, "to be perfect," which climaxes the six antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, should best be applied to the command to love all, especially the enemy. Thus it speaks to both people and nations.

The three chapters on the Gospel of Mark are excellent for understanding the purpose and setting of the first gospel. We agree that its setting is a time of potential suffering and persecution for the Markan community. The ambiguous behavior of the disciples who finally fail Jesus represents the struggle within the Markan church. An instructive chapter on the role of the disciples is very good. Tannehill is correct when he focuses on the three passion predictions and the three calls to obedient discipleship, with Mark 8:34-35 the center of the story for Mark. Mark challenges disciples to be as faithful as Jesus was faithful to his commission from God. Against some current interpreters, the author affirms that the disciples were ultimately loyal to Jesus after the resurrection. He thus interprets 14:28 and 16:7 as referring to the resurrection and not the parousia, as some have done.

On "Paul as Liberator and Oppressor": we hear of two new ways to interpret Paul, political and feminist. The author finds both helpful but not the final word on grasping Paul. The chapter on "Participation in Christ" is worth reading for Lutherans: "Here Paul goes beyond stating that Christ died for us, to claim that we died with Christ, using participatory language." We find this view to be persuasively argued.

Walter Pilgrim
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Christians and a Land Called Holy: How We Can Foster Justice, Peace, and Hope. By Charles P. Lutz and Robert O. Smith. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. x and 168 pages. Paper. $15.00.

Christians have a special calling to seek peace for both Israelis and Palestinians. With this major premise, Lutz and Smith provide a primer for understanding the complex nature of an age-old struggle in the Holy Land. Together they paint a complementary picture. Smith's approach is that of a scholar (and campus pastor and administrator in the ELCA Global Mission Middle East desk) who focused on Christian-Zionism in his Ph.D. studies at Baylor University. Lutz brings decades of experience in journalism and advocacy. Both stand with one foot in the Holy Land and the other in the center of the American church scene. In an appendix, Roman Catholic Ronald Witherup addresses the question, "Whose land is it?"

There is much written these days about the Palestinian conflict. The result too often is that those in the pew step back from this complex issue with its competing claims of land, covenant, and human rights. Those that try to engage often become frustrated or fall into despair. If Christians must choose one book to launch into the fray, this would be a good choice.

The authors begin by making a compelling case that Jerusalem and the Holy Land must have a special place in the heart of the church, especially in a day when Christians are emigrating from the land in alarming numbers and when the U.S. government is becoming increasingly one-sided. The authors proceed to clarify a complex picture and provide practical advice.

In the end, they call for a position that is neither pro-Palestinian nor pro-Israeli, but one that is pro-justice. While calling for deeper theological study, they appeal also to the practical: paying attention; praying fervently; public-policy advocating; and pilgrimage making. With such a focus, the authors believe that peace and hope may follow.

Fred Strickert
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Language, Hermeneutic, and History: Theology after Barth and Bultmann. By James M. Robinson. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008. vii and 249 pages. Paper. $29.00.

Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness. By James M. Robinson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. v and 258 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Robinson, emeritus Professor of New Testament at Claremont Graduate University, is known as an expert interpreter of Continental theology. The work on *Language* reflects Robinson's involvement in German studies. He and John B. Cobb produced a series entitled *New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions among Continental and American Theologians.* Three volumes were published: *The Later Heidegger and Theology* (1963); *The New Hermeneutic* (1964); and *Theology as History* (1967). This volume is a reprint of Robinson's contributions to that series. In the "Later Heidegger" he discusses how Heidegger shifted his understanding of *Dasein* in relation to metaphysics and how that affected German theology. In "New Hermeneutic" Robinson helpfully describes several uses of the term hermeneutic such as interpretation, translation or commentary. The Barthian revolution reverses these definitions. The text is now the subject and the reader the object. In "Theology" Robinson centers on the work of Pannenberg, who maintains that God's self-revelation occurred through God's acts in history. This stands in contrast to existential revelation as found in Bultmann.

The work on Jesus also contains reprints of prior essays, first written as early as 1982 and then published in a lengthy tome, *The Sayings Gospel Q: Collected Essays* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005). The articles in this book offer readers a more immediate access to some of those found in the larger volume. Leaving his interest in continental hermeneutics (see above), Robinson shifted to a study of the Nag Hammadi documents. In 1985, by organizing The International Q Project, he turned (or returned) to a critical analysis of Q. As indicated by the subtitle, Robinson was interested in the earliest witness to Jesus. In his first essay he begins with the affirmation that "Q is certainly the most important source for reconstructing the teaching of Jesus." It is in the earliest or archaic collections imbedded in Q that one finds material originating from the historical Jesus.

Robinson has more than an academic interest in Q. He tries to show that the Q teaching of Jesus calls for a reign of God (in our time) that includes sharing, nonviolent responses, healing, and hospitality. The most interesting chapter in the book, for some of us, is his theological autobiography in which he describes his own life journey as well as contacts with his colleagues. In a final appendix he presents his edition of Q in English.

Graydon F. Snyder
Chicago

Faithful Interpretation. Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World. By A.K.M. Adam. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. 188 pages. Paper. $20.00.

This volume of 8 essays on postmodern interpretation of the New Testament reflects the wisdom of one who has reflected deeply on the subject. The author, professor at both Princeton and Seabury-Western seminaries, has previously published excellent guides on postmodern interpretation. While acknowledging the necessity and need for historical criticism of the Bible, he argues persuasively that interpreters must go beyond that and that both exegesis and theology need to join together for proper interpretation.

In chapter two, he disputes the judgment of Käsemann and others that historical criticism is the only way to prevent a docetic Christology. He agrees that docetism presents a danger to the church's Christology but insists that the way to combat it is by a Chalcedonian Christology not limited to the humanity of Jesus, as most modern interpreters do in neglecting anything beyond history. This is a fascinating chapter worth reading for Lutherans, who want to be both historical and theological in our Christology.

Chapter four reviews recent examinations of Matthew's gospel and the particular theme of anti-Judaism. Again, while recognizing this motif, Adams suggests ways to understand this Gospel that remain faithful to Matthew's intention and within his obvious Jewish Christianity. And in a footnote, he rightly states that the resistance to any anti-Judaism by modern interpreters should not lead to any demeaning of Jesus as the Christ or of the Christian faith.

The question of the right interpretation of texts forms the subject of chapter five. Here the author distinguishes between what he calls integral and differential hermeneutics. The former claims there is only one meaning to a text, while the latter allows for a variety of meanings. In his discussion, the author sometimes sets up straw men to make his case for different readings.For example, he mentions three new books on The Sermon on the Mount and then asks which one is the authoritative one. Most interpreters do not ask such a question, but simply try to learn from all commentaries.

Perhaps chapter seven is the most provocative chapter of the book. The author attacks both the claims of historical criticism to objectivity and its claim to critical self-rigor. "The history to which these critics generally appeal is a projection of their own methodological presuppositions." While agreeing that there may be an objective text to interpret, Adam thinks its interpretation is not one but the aggregate of community interests. We find his attitude too harsh on historical critics. Yet he is to be applauded for his courage in challenging the assertions of many exegetes about objectivity or value-free interpretations. This book by an Anglican exegete is a much needed and accessible reflection on faithful interpretation today.

Walter Pilgrim
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Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture. By Brian Brock. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. xxi and 386 pages. Paper. $34.00

Brian Brock has courageously engaged the fragmented disciplines of biblical studies, patristic and reformation interpretation, and modern Christian ethics. It may be too much for one book, but Brock's effort merits the attention of pastors and scholars. His thesis is that Christian ethics is the continual and communal 'singing' of Scripture through which the Spirit transforms the people of God. By 'singing', he means a distinctively Christian way of speaking that includes prayer, praise and worship. 'Singing' emphasizes God's agency to which human agency responds.

Part I surveys biblical scholars and theologians who address the problem of relating the Bible to ethics. Scholars offer five solutions: hermeneutical, communitarian, biblical ethics, biblical theology and exegetical theology. The climax is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's exegesis of Psalm 119, from whom he learns that Christian ethics is continuous exegesis of Scripture and culture within Christian traditions and a believing community.

Part II examines two figures of the tradition: Augustine and Luther. His reading of Augustine on Psalms 32, 22 and 27, and Luther on Psalms 118, 1, 8, and 111 is insightful and an asset to anyone studying the Psalms in Augustine and Luther's thought.

Part III is Brock's proposal, arguing that God claims and shapes us through 'singing' Scripture in prayer and praise. As an example, he interprets Psalm 130 and Psalm 104.

While Brock's proposal is refreshing, there is more to do. His discussion of Augustine and Luther lacks broader engagement with the role of the law in their theology. For example, Luther's discussion of the uses of the law is absent. He criticizes ethicists for neglecting eschatology, but his own reflections in this respect are shallow. Christian ethics should be practiced in 'real time' in concrete situations and reflections on Scripture, but he does not give examples of 'real time' ethical and exegetical analysis.

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A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics. By David Jasper. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. xii and 148 pages. Paper. $19.95.

Jasper should be congratulated on this succinct account of biblical "hermeneutics" targeted for the general, non-specialist reader. The book manages to sketch in broad outlines the long sweep of biblical interpretation from the beginnings of the Christian era to the contemporary period in a way that simplifies without being unduly reductionistic. It really is what it claims to be, "A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics."

The book is broken up into seven chapters. The first addresses the complex relationship that exists between texts and their readers when the goal is understanding (e.g., the heremeneutical circle; hermeneutics of faith vs. hermeneutics of suspicion; the role of metaphor). The second chapter speeds through ancient "rabbinic" interpretation, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and the distinctions between the two main hermeneutical centers of the early church (Antioch and Alexandria). Chapter three moves as quickly through the medieval period up into that of the Enlightenment. The last four chapters slow down a bit to describe more recent historical periods including Romanticism and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The overview concludes (chapter seven) with an analysis of "Varieties of Post Modernism."

In his romp through the centuries, Jasper manages to plot the major high points of the long tradition of biblical interpretation. He includes discussions of the early church fathers (Clement, Origin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine); diverse medieval masters (Aquinas, Lyra, Eckhart, Kempis); and the Reformation greats (Erasmus, Luther, Calvin). Unfortunately, his treatment of Luther is among the weakest of the book. In Jasper's format there is simply not enough time to do justice to the paradoxes and deep sense of irony that underlie Luther's hermeneutics (e.g., the notion that revelation often occurs *sub contrario*—under the form of its opposite). Luther does not simplify easily.

Jasper is more nuanced in his descriptions of the paradigm shifts in biblical interpretation that came with modernity. He deals with the emergence of the critical spirit epitomized in the scientific method and engages the post-Enlightenment development of historical consciousness as well as the theory of evolution. In these critical centuries Jasper singles out such figures as Reimarus, Semler, Kant, Schleiermacher, Coleridge, Renan, Barth, Bultmann, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. As he moves on to post-modernism, deconstruction and postcolonial readings of Scripture are among the topics discussed.

This book would serve well as a basic introduction to the subject of hermeneutics. It is as free from technical jargon as is possible in such a work. Each chapter ends with summary statements as well as suggested discussion questions. It is designed to be used in colleges, but could also function well in church adult study classes for those who would like to roll up their sleeves and engage the topic of hermeneutics. Each chapter is about 20 pages long, a good length for weekly reading assignments in such a context.

What Jasper offers us in this little work is more substantial than it might appear at first glance. That is due to the fact that it is written in a disarmingly simple and straightforward style. Though Jasper acknowledges that there is much more to be said about the role of hermeneutics in the church's engagement with Scripture, his hope for the reader of this book is "not simply that you will know more about hermeneutics, but that you will become a better reader yourself—and this latter aim is by the far the more important." Given the book's primary aim—to encourage an intelligent reading of Scripture that is both careful and imaginative—it is a fine entry point into the "hermeneutical circle," a circle that, as Jasper suggests throughout his work, has Christ at its center

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The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Edited by Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. xiii and 410 pages. Paper. $29.00.

This collection of essays by different scholars from a conference of the Oxford-Princeton Research Partnership in 2002 was originally published by Mohr Siebeck in 2003 and now is reprinted, with a new preface, by Fortress Press. The provocative title signals the revisionist agenda shared by the essays. The book notes that the older super sessionist model, based on an uncritical reading of Acts, assumed that Christianity had decisively separated from Judaism already by the time of Paul. Recent scholarship has preferred a model of a "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity after the destruction of the temple in 70 C. E. In this view, rabbinic Judaism grew out of the Pharisees, and Christianity, both by choice and by force, separated decisively from the synagogue at the same time. However, the essayists argue that the process was much slower and more complicated, so that the parting of the ways should be placed in the fourth century, with rabbinic Judaism forming itself by reference to Christianity as much as Christianity by reference to Judaism. But some authors question whether it is useful to speak of a parting of the ways at all, since well into the early Middle Ages there was contact and conflict between Jews and Christians in places as varied as Rome and Mesopotamia.

To speak of the "ways that never parted" seems, even on the evidence of this book, to be an overstatement. To be sure, contact between Jews and Christians continued, and a number of articles document some surprising and fascinating instances of this contact. Yet it seems an exaggeration to claim that the two movements never really parted. This book will be helpful to people who want to think more deeply and historically about the long, arduous road that Jews and Christians have traveled, ineluctably intertwined with each other even as they are in conflict and competition.

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Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today. Edited by Marit Trelstad. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. xvi and 320 pages. Paper. $20.00.

In one of the nineteen essays in this volume, Jürgen Moltmann observes: "At the beginning of Christianity there are two crosses: One is a real cross, the other a symbol. One is a murderous gallows of terror and oppression, the other a dream-cross of an emperor." The diverse essays in this important volume struggle in different ways to come to terms with the irony that after Constantine (312 C.E.) the cross of Jesus became a symbol of imperial might as well as a sign of God's solidarity with those crushed by the top-down power politics of empire. The legacies of both streams of interpretation are very much with us in 21st-century North America even though the former seems to exhibit cultural dominance. The book offers a particularly rich and challenging set of dialogue partners, then, for any theologian of the cross who is conscious of how easily the cross of Christ can become a tool not of God's reconciliation of humanity but of the devil's rebellion against God. The cross can function as a weapon of oppression as well as an instrument of liberation.

The revelation of the abuse of the cross in Christian theology and culture has most recently come from feminist and womanist scholars. It is appropriate, then, that women's voices are well represented in this volume, beginning with the reprint of Delores S. Williams classic "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption" (1991) which reveals the underbelly of the primary theories of atonement operative in the traditional Christian imagination, i.e., ransom, satisfaction, substitution, and moral example. The wide range of the responses by the women scholars in this book to the abuses of the sacrificial language in Christian tradition, however, also testifies to the diversity of the feminist theological trajectory at this point in time.

Established scholars that have been working for some time to articulate an appropriate Theology of the Cross (e.g., Williams, Moltmann, Douglas John Hall) are joined by a very interesting group of younger scholars in this book. Taken together, the authors represent very diverse social locations. The concerns that are brought to the table, though wide ranging, are centered on what might in Aristotelian discourse be called the "causes" of the Atonement (efficient, formal, material, final). That is, the conversation, while consistently reflecting over the meaning of Jesus' death, brings in many subjects of critical contemporary importance including imperialism, the role of suffering, violence in its various forms (e.g., racism, sexism, spousal abuse, destruction of the ecosphere). Given the new militarism of the United States, war and the post-9/11 justification for torture are also appropriately engaged.

It is clear that Luther is a major theological resource for those in this volume who continue to see the continued importance of the cross for proclaiming the Word of God both as judgment against human sin as well as a source of liberating grace experienced as the mercy of God. Douglas John Hall makes the observation, however, that especially with regard to understanding the revelatory value of the cross, Luther's voice "remains something of a stranger even among the churches that call themselves by his name."

A close reading of this volume will, among other things, convince one of the enduring importance of Luther's distinction between a *theologia crucis* and a *theologia gloriae* as well as the need for this distinction to be better understood by those of privilege in American churches.

Although there are a couple of reprinted or reworked essays in this volume, most appear for the first time. The volume would serve well as a textbook for college or seminary courses that take on contemporary interpretations of the atonement. It would also benefit those parish leaders who are concerned that the message of the cross be experienced among the people of God as a liberating word yet acknowledge the need for their own theological reflections to be pushed in new directions. I heartily recommend the work and applaud its commitment to careful, self-reflective scrutiny whenever we "lift high the cross," whether in Christian assembly or in our own personal pieties.

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at Philadelphia

***Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*.** By Willard M. Swartley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. xvii and 542 pages. Cloth. $34.00.

Willard Swartley is professor emeritus of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He has written many books and articles on peace and ethics such as *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women.* According to Swartley, the Gospel of Matthew transforms the political messianic king into a peaceable, meek and humble king. In Mark Jesus is portrayed as a divine warrior who battles evil powers by self-giving on the cross. Luke's Jesus brings salvation, joy, peace, and praise for the glory of God. In Acts Luke continues the Jesus message as his followers led by the Holy Spirit proclaim the good news of peace. Paul's gospel reconciles divergent peoples and creates a new community, the body of Christ, that will take precedence over human institutions.

The Johannine corpus presents difficult challenges since the community of believers stands in irreconcilable conflict with the world. Nevertheless, as Swartley argues, there are some narratives, such as the Samaritan woman at the well, that reflect concern for another ethnic group. In sum, the New Testament writings call for the readers to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and imitate the suffering servant. In that way Christ is our peace.

Swartley does a careful analysis of key texts, and is in constant dialogue with other scholars. Most of the affirmative dialogue occurs with members of the Peace Churches, especially Mennonites. The reader may wonder how traditional scholars would have read the same texts. In any case, Swartley is correct: for the most part such a mainline discussion of peace is a missing piece. Swartley's concern is strictly biblical theology. He does not deal with the ethical impact of peace theology on the post-New Testament church or in the modern day, even though some of us know he has those concerns. Another problem arises with his designation of authorship. Though he knows scholarly opinion, he includes secondary Paul with genuine Paul and he includes Revelation in the Johannine group. These groupings do not result in a congruent ethic.

Graydon F. Snyder
Chicago, IL

Essential Sermons. The Works of Saint Augustine Part III-Homilies. Introduction and Notes by Daniel E. Doyle, O.S.A., translation by Edmund Hill, O.P., edited by Boniface Ramsey. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007. 440 pages. Paper. $29.95.

Lex orandi, lex credendi ["The way one prays is the way one believes"]. One might well say of theologians that "The way one preaches is the way one's theology is made clear." This volume shows Augustine the pastor, the biblical interpreter, the rhetorician, and the curate of souls. He is not afraid to be extremely directive to his congregation; they applaud when they like what he says. Read these sermons along with his *Confessions, De civitate dei* and *De doctrina christiana* to appreciate this bishop of Hippo.

St. Augustine's sermons fill eleven volumes in this English edition of his works. This anthology of seventy-six sermons will serve well as a text for classrooms and an introduction to this great theologian's down-to-earth explication of the faith and exhortation to holy living for the laity.

Edgar Krentz
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Emerging Heart: Global Spirituality and the Sacred. By Beverly Lanzetta. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. 134 pages. Paper. $18.00.

One should not be fooled by the relatively brief number of pages in this book. While thin in the amount of shelf space it will consume, it is deep, rich and filled with content that exponentially expands beyond its physical size. Beverly Lanzetta probes the contemporary experience of a hunger for the spiritual that has appeared around the globe.

In fact, it is in part from a photograph of the earth spinning as a globe in the universe that she begins to lay out her thesis that we are in need of a global spirituality. Drawing from the work of philosopher Karl Jaspers, who described the span of time and formation of human consciousness around 800 B.C.E. as the 'Axial Age,' and the work of Ewert Cousins, who contends we are in the throes of a Second Axial Period, Lanzetta moves to describe the emerging global spiritual landscape of today.

For those whose curiosity raises wonderment at what the Spirit is up to in today's world, this book holds a nutritious feeding of insight, reflections, and hope. At the heart of this she makes a case for nonviolence, the feminine dimension of the Divine, and learning to live as a person of deeply experienced faith in a global community of many religious expressions. This is not a book for those content with life and spirituality as it is. It has the potential and energy to catapult one into an experience of an emerging heart and the on-going movements of the Spirit present as a global spirituality arises.

Ginger Anderson-Larson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine. By Jerome H. Neyrey. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. xviii and 313 pages. Paper. $25.00.

In this interesting volume, the Roman Catholic scholar Jerome Neyrey, long in the forefront of social-scientific exegesis, turns his hand to the study of God, "the neglected factor in New Testament study." To do so he applies various models stemming from social-scientific criticism (e.g., patronage, honor/shame, purity and holiness) to recover the understanding of God in eight New Testament writings (Mark, Matthew, Acts of the Apostles, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, John, and Hebrews). All this is done with great care to bring in the larger Greco-Roman cultural and intellectual world. In doing so, Neyrey makes important observations about the theology of each of the New Testament writings studied. The book is supplied with appendices that give convenient thumbnail sketches of the social-scientific models his close readings of the texts assume.

For those who are indebted to Lutheran theology, the chapters dealing with Paul are, I believe, the most important. For instance, in his chapter on Romans, Neyrey contends—against much New Testament scholarship and in the spirit of Melanchthon—that the work can be characterized as a "systematic theology." He identifies a "system" in Romans through which Paul, in accordance with ancient practice, sets out his epistemology, physics, and ethics. More importantly, Neyrey observes how Paul carries forward the Jewish understanding of God's "Two Attributes" (e.g., articulated in Exodus 34:6-7), paraphrased by Neyrey as "mercy" and "just judgment." Neyrey's extensive discussion on how these attributes of God play out in Romans, is fascinating. Here and in other chapters dealing with Paul, Neyrey brings in extensive discussions concerning the significant differences in the various Old Testament covenants (i.e., those with Abraham, Moses, and David), Paul's nuanced understanding of Law, as well as his scriptural hermeneutic. Interestingly, much of what Neyrey recovers about Paul's understanding of God mirrors Lutheran reflections of God's Word experienced in terms of Law and Gospel, a theological trajectory that was not Neyrey's starting point in his exegesis of these Pauline texts.

I can heartily recommend this book for all readers and especially for those Lutherans who would like to become better acquainted with social-science criticism as well as understand its importance for recovering the theology of the New Testament.

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The Diet of John the Baptist: "Locusts and Wild Honey" in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation. By James A. Kelhoffer. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 176. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005. xxiii and 256 pages. Cloth. 69 Euros.

John the Baptist lived on a sparse diet, but James Kelhoffer invites readers to a more than ample smorgasbord. His analysis of the biblical record has something to arouse taste buds of a variety of locust sighters, be they inclined to entomological, biological, dietetic, archeological, or ethnographic data. As for those who hope to find further support for their veggie kick in John's biography, a rush to acclamation is ill-advised.

Kelhoffer begins with the question "What is a 'locust'?" and notes that grasshoppers and locusts are not two different insects. Furthermore, with sharp linguistic awareness he observes that, lacking specification in Mark 1:6c and Mt 3:4c, the Greek word is best rendered with the generic "grasshopper," which would also include locusts.

Dining on locusts was not only common in the Semitic world but even at times and in some areas considered a benchmark of gastronomic elegance. On the other hand, in the Greco-Roman world there is ambivalence concerning locusts as appropriate cuisine. Finding the application of such and other data to John's dietary habits rather inviting, Kelhoffer proceeds to examine dietary habits of "present-day locust eaters," with special reference to concern about calories, protein, and carbohydrates.

Upon observing that two popular books on eating habits in Bible times omit reference to locusts, Kelhoffer proceeds to fill the gap by defining the historical John in terms of calories he might have required for a man of his height and age, as determined from examination of anthropological data for his period. He was certainly no slamdunker; from eleven ancient male skeletal remains in John's area of activity one can infer an approximate height of 1.65 m (65″). To survive, John would have needed "some 2490 calories and forty grams of protein per day." John could easily have collected a sufficient number of locusts to meet that goal. But what about carbohydrates? This question leads into a discussion about honey.

Kelhoffer considers it important to ask whether it was produced by bees or trees. The value of uncultivated or wild honey was seriously questioned in the Greco-Roman world, and followers of Moses would question the purity of bee honey. So Kelhoffer explores the word "honey" in the extended sense of plant juice or sap and displays evidence for common use of the latter. Nevertheless, even with benefit of locusts rich in protein and supplemented with honey, John would have required other viands to meet his need, especially of vitamin C. Mark's mode of recital leaves the door open for options. On the other hand, Matthew's editing of the tradition limits John to dependence on locusts and wild honey for nourishment. Given the improbability that John could have done his work adequately under such dietary restraint, Kelhoffer probes for an answer to Matthew's divergent account.

The truth is that Mark 1:2-3 connects John's wilderness experience with the scenario set forth in Isaiah; the reference to John's diet reinforces that point; John is a new Elijah, a conclusion rejected by Luke, who omits Matthew's and Mark's recital. In distinction from Mark, Matthew puts John in the wilderness before citing Isaiah 40:3 and does not require John's cuisine as such to make an association with the wilderness. Hence he is not so much interested in *what* John ate but through his editorial procedure focuses on John's dependence on the wilderness for *all* his sustenance. By doing so, Matthew connects John with heroic figures, among them Judas Maccabeus, who met all their needs in the wilderness. John is a survivor in the heroic mode.

Although Kelhoffer does not hold court for trivia aficionados, he includes in his description of locusts an observation from an ancient manual that a cicada can swim in pure wine but will drown in wine diluted by water. All these and other data relating to locust and honey cuisine are designed to thwart facile conclusions or interpretive romance based on so-called literary reading of whole texts without the hard work of careful historical and linguistic analysis of their parts. A major conclusion drawn by Kelhoffer on the basis of dietary data has to do with claims that Matthew and Mark endorse vegetarianism or asceticism. Verdict: untenable.

The way is now cleared for a bevy of Greco-Roman and patristic writers, and interpreters down to the present day, to weigh in for examination of the ways in which Mark's and Matthew's reference to John's cuisine triggered instruction (*paideia*) for a variety of publics through the centuries. Two lines of appropriation of John's behavior in the wilderness dominate: John as ethical model and as vegetarian.

While preparing a dictionary known as BDAG, I searched for solid information about John's choice of victuals and its significance in the biblical narratives. Alas, lacking the time for a thorough investigation and unaware that a study with most of the answers was in the works, I contented myself with learned gossip. Kelhoffer justly, but with grace, rebukes me and my predecessors for egregious inadequacies in our attempts at definition of "locusts". Therefore users of any reference work predating Kelhoffer's study should read his comments on John the Baptist's diet before further engagement in exegetical newsmongering.

This study is replete with information above and beyond what appears to be a narrow scope of inquiry. Some books devoted to learned inquiry supply a kernel of value here and there. Kelhoffer's work embraces vast acreage for gleaning. Anyone devoted to so-called "close reading" of ancient documents can use this study as a refresher course in how to probe a text. Those who have interest in patristic writers will save much time in their research through the use of this book. Others whose forte is grammatical investigation may be stimulated to examine the validity of one of Kelhoffer's linchpin conclusions: the exclusivity of Matthew's reference to John's diet. Some gourmets may consider omission of a recipe for preparation of locusts a lamentable deficiency. Where is Apicius when we need him?

By the way, when eating locusts be aware that their wings and legs are "not easily digestible."

Frederick W. Danker
St. Louis, Missouri

Faith & Fitness: Diet and Exercise for a Better World. By Tom P. Hafer. Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2007. 143 pages. Paper. $14.99.

In today's fast-paced and hectic world, exercise and diet have become secondary concerns for many Americans. Tom Hafer has written an easy-to-read volume in which readers can find motivation for re-prioritizing some essential parts of their lives. Hafer draws upon his experience with senior citizens whom he met at his physical therapy clinic in Florida and the key life events which brought him to the place to write such a book. The author is a physical therapist, a licensed trainer, and a seminary graduate, a combination fitting to provide a text such as this.

The first chapter focuses on what is important in life: love. The author shares his experience with seniors who have lived a long life and found that love is the most important thing in their lives. Hafer goes on to describe what true love involves. The second chapter focuses on food, and conveys the message that we should eat in ways that are kinder to our world neighbors. This is supported by specific ways in which one may better one's eating habits. In the third chapter, Hafer promotes exercise and how it helps a person preventatively, physically, and mentally. In the last chapter, he pulls together themes from the New Testament and the previous three chapters to promote a lifestyle of love and compassion, focused on Christ and others.

Faith & Fitness raises many good points regarding a person's health and lifestyle choices. American Christianity has encouraged habits that are neither good for the individual nor the environment. This text is recommended for those who wish to challenge their thinking on health and spirituality, but understand that this is a small step toward that sort of thinking. Pastors looking to raise awareness on these issues may want to consider this text for their laity.

George Tsakiridis
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The New Testament with Imagination. By William Loader. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. X and 206 pages. Paper. $16.00.

For over four decades, William Loader, an Australian biblical scholar and teacher, has developed his method of engaging people outside the university with the New Testament. In five chapters (two on Jesus, one on Paul, one on the Synoptic Gospels, and one on the Johannine community), Loader focuses his readers' attention on clusters of texts that he sees as representative of leading themes in the NT.

Loader treats the chapters as exercises in imagination. He begins each one with a narrative designed to help his readers imagine what daily existence would be like in the time of Jesus or Paul, for example. In this way readers are drawn into a slice of the biblical world and gain a greater appreciation of the biblical people's social realities and world of ideas. Loader's "you are there" introductions—extrapolated from biblical texts—resemble the "historical fiction" of Gerd Theissen's *Shadow of the Galilean.*

The bulk of each chapter revolves around core passages dealing with the major themes. To prepare readers to appreciate these texts in their literary, religious, and social contexts, he interweaves in summary fashion much biblical scholarship. For chapter one's focus on specific Gospel passages (Luke 4:14-30, Matt 20:1-16, Matt 5:17-48, and Mark 10), Loader includes what the readers need to know to understand the passages (and would not appreciate without the help of a biblical scholar). When he considers Luke's portrayal of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Luke 4:14-30, for example, he includes summary sections about the sources used by Luke, the significance of liberation hopes within the Roman Empire, and the distinction between the Lukan context and the historical Jesus. Or, when working with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matt 20:1-16, Loader discusses how parables work and the cultural context in which the parable makes sense.

While the first chapter develops the themes of hope and change embodied in the historical Jesus' kingdom message and healings, chapter two describes "springtime in Jerusalem" as the context for understanding Jesus' crucifixion as the tragic culmination of growing controversy and conflict provoked by Jesus' ministry. Loader ends the chapter by discussing two resurrection texts: Mark 16:1-8 and 1 Cor 15:1-11.

In chapter 3, Loader jumps ahead two decades to consider the multiple problems within early Christian communities addressed by Paul's letters (Gal 1-2, 1 Cor 11-14, Rom 1-3, and the household codes in Colossians and Ephesians). In chapter 4, he focuses on the period when the Gospels were written (70-85 C.E.) and illustrates how each writer edited and shaped the Jesus-tradition (Mark 6:30-9:86, Matt 15:1-20, Matt 18-19, and Luke 10:25-42). Finally, in chapter 5, Loader samples Johannine passages (chapters 1-3, 4, 6, 13-17) after employing his opening narrative to draw readers into the late first-century world of the Johannine community. Loader concludes the final chapter with a brief, yet helpful, consideration of the Book of Revelation.

Although scholars could squabble with some of Loader's interpretive reconstructions of texts and contexts, his volume can be used with real profit in congregations—and even college and seminary classes—to draw people into the first century context and the unfolding Jesus and Christian movement. His appendices and bibliography also add value.

James L. Bailey
Wartburg Seminary

Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission. By Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nessan. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008 235 pages Paper. $20.00.

As a seminary president, in my rounds of parish calling (i.e. congregational visits), the question I am asked more than any other is, "What are you teaching in the seminary about administration?" It's not really the nuts-and-bolts management matters that the laity often seem to find lacking in our graduates; it's the more elusive "leadership" qualities that constantly need more nurturing in all of us.

Two long-timers in both parish ministry and seminary teaching, Everist and Nessan "get it" that ministerial formation includes both solid theological grounding and imparting leadership insights and "best practices." They combine efforts to touch all the critical bases of community formation, leading with integrity and authority, maintaining good boundaries and growing ever more deeply into personal spiritual practices and life-sustaining collegiality, and approaching leadership with the tools of "systems thinking," and "asset-mapping" tucked away in one's quiver. A review of the endnotes and index find leadership "big names" like Greenleaf, Heifetz, and Friedman interspersed cheek-by-jowl with such theological giants as Bonhoeffer, Buber, Niebuhr, and Ruether.

The book begins by asserting that "all congregations are in the process of being transformed." The authors sound their Lutheran trumpets in declaring that "life-giving relationships are based on unconditional acceptance." Such a grace-ful approach to ministry is not as avant-garde as many of today's "consultants" seem to suggest. The Wartburg duo argue for old-fashioned ministerial practices like parish calling (especially when one is new to a faith community and needs to get to know the folks), taking time to develop trust, honoring the context, and planting one's feet for the long haul in recognition that "perhaps the most integral factor toward promoting the increase of transforming leadership in the church is to increase the average tenure of those who have been called and commissioned to serve as leaders." Knowing both evangelical outreach passions and justice commitments on the part of Nessan and Everist, I was not surprised to find a compelling chapter near the end on intentional efforts to create transformational opportunities for "people on the edge."

In *Transforming Leadership*, two fine teachers of the church collaborate to offer an outstanding resource, which brings me a new challenge. With an already-overflowing bibliography for a course I teach on church administration and leadership, I now have to find a way to add this as a new "must read"!

Michael Cooper-White
Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary

The Power of God and the Gods of Power. By Daniel L. Migliore. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2008. x + 141 pages. Paper. $16.95.

Throughout the history of the world, the acquisition of power has been central to the human condition. Although understood differently, conceptions of power are crucial to the Christian faith. Daniel Migliore presents an overview of the way power is viewed and experienced in the world from a Christian perspective. He presents a comparison between the true power of God and the false power of idols and sin. This text is an expansion and revision of his 1983 book *The Power of God.*

The book is divided into seven chapters, culminating in a discussion on Christian-Muslim dialogue that, in some senses, acts as a practical example of how power is viewed by Christian theology. The book is balanced, on the one hand presenting a fairly traditional theological view, but on the other, progressive, calling for Christians to move beyond the idolatrous conceptions of power that are familiar to American culture. Early on, the author defines the word "idol" in a manner similar to what many young churchgoers heard in Sunday School as a child: "An idol is anything we substitute for the true God." In these plain, familiar words, foundational truth is laid. In the heart of the book, Migliore describes power from a cultural, a biblical, and a theological viewpoint. Ultimately the power of God is shown in the Trinity, where "the Christian view of the fulfillment of human life has profound political, economic, and social implications." The author is not arguing against power in general, but against the wrong kinds of power; he states that the church is not "a 'power-free zone.'" The final chapter on dialogue with Muslims is helpful in using Islamic beliefs to illumine a Christian theological framework. The chapter is most valuable when read from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy.

Migliore has created a text that is geared toward those in the church, challenging readers with orthodox theological constructs in a practical way. The idols of our broader culture constantly beckon us to be less than God intended. Migliore shines light on these "gods of power," giving the reader tools to examine their own life and world. Each chapter ends with a few thoughtful questions to encourage further study. Migliore provides a thoughtful analysis of power and the Christian faith that is affirming.

George Tsakiridis
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

John of the Cross' Living Flame of Love—for Everyone. By Elizabeth Ruth Obbard. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007. 72 pages. Paper. $8.95.

In today's world the search for spirituality can take many forms, and often one finds sources devoid of real meaning. In contrast to this, New City Press publishes short, easy to read, classic spiritual authors such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross in the "for everyone" series. This series contains concise books that can be read in one sitting, but must be mined continually to reach the depths of their meaning. This particular text focuses on the "Living Flame of Love" by John of the Cross. The author states that this "is the shortest of John's complete works and contains the fullness of his teaching and experience." Combined with the fact that this particular text was written for a laywoman whom he knew, this book is a good starting point for the layperson into John's writings.

John's writing presents great poetry intertwined with spiritual depth and maxims such as "Real spirituality always works from the inside out, not the other way around" and "If we are not careful we will identify God with passing pleasure and beautiful feelings." John attempts to separate the reader from attempts at spirituality that are only about "feeling good." "So we should count it a great favor when we are tested through suffering." Moving through this text, he presents the metaphoric pairs of flame and wound, and of light and love.

In sum, the brevity of this volume does not represent its profundity. The translation is quite accessible and a great way to expose oneself to the writings of John of the Cross. This book is a triumph in putting classic spiritual literature into a concise devotional volume.

George Tsakiridis
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Jesus and the Miracle Tradition. By Paul J. Achtemeier. Eugene, OR; Cascade Books, 2008). xvii and 255 pages. Paper. $30.00.

Achtemeier, a well known New Testament scholar, has assembled nine of his previously printed articles in this significant volume. Eight were written while he was Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. The ninth article, "Miracles in the New Testament and the Greco-Roman world," was written for inclusion in the work. The nine articles are divided into three sets of topics with three in each set. Group one deals with the precanonical background of three miracle stories in Mark: the stilling of the storm (4:35-41), the healing of the boy with an unclean spirit (9:14-29), and the healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). The second set of essays examines the way the miracle traditions have been used in the canonical gospels, particularly Mark and Luke. In addition to a study on the Lukan use of the Jesus miracles, there are two studies on pre-Markan miracle catenae. The third set deals with Jesus' miracles in the Hellenistic Christian milieu, one on the miracle tradition and the divine man, another on Jesus as a miracle worker in the apocrypha and finally the function of miracles in the Greco-Roman world.

The presence of miracles in the Gospels has been a puzzle and even an embarrassment to readers of the New Testament. Scholars have attempted to give a modern rational explanation or even show that the narratives are later additions. In the last decades of the twentieth century Achtemeier wrote these essays to show how miracles became an essential part of the Gospel tradition. In chapter one Achtemeier reflects on the background of the divine conquering of the waters. He traces the water miracle back through the Babylonian epic with Marduk, the Ugaritic Baal cycle, and Genesis 1:2. Whatever readers may think of the plausibility of the Mark 4:35-41 account, he shows it does have an ancient religious history. The miracle stories reflect the power of Jesus. However, some stories make someone other than Jesus the center of attention. Such is the case with blind Bartimaeus. Achtemeier argues such miracles are a call to discipleship (Mark 10:52) rather than a demonstration of divine power. In a fascinating essay entitled "The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," Achtemeier tries to show that the pre-Markan Jesus was understood as a Hellenistic *theios aner* (divine man). In that sense his life and his demonstration of power was more important that a theology of death and resurrection. One can see this in the Markan Eucharistic tradition, which depends more on the miraculous feeding of the multitude, with bread, but no wine, than on the Lord's Supper tradition. The Markan account of the Supper even lacks "forgiveness of sin."

Useful as these essays are, they were written before the rise of socio-historical criticism. These more recent scholars attempt to understand Jesus in terms of his social context, not in terms of modern rational thought (a philosophical suspension of judgment). Consequently they are more sympathetic to the miracle tradition in the Gospels than were Achtemeier's 20th century colleagues (for example, Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer*).

Graydon F. Snyder
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Briefly Noted

Engaging the Bible (Fortress, $18) contains lectures given at the Boston University School of Theology from 2003 to 2004 by Aida Irizarry-Fernandez, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Carter Heyward, Kwok Pui-lan and Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, plus an introduction by co-editor Choi Hee An and a conclusion by co-editor Katheryn Pfisterer Darr. The lectures, entitled "A Mosaic of Voices" stressed multicultural issues as seen by women theologians representing different cultural, ethnic, and /or social perspectives. Each article contains a section on a contemporary issue, a section on a related biblical topic, and questions for discussion. *Graydon F. Snyder*

Daily Bible Commentary: A Guide for Reflection and Prayer. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007. 13 vols. Paper. $159.00. (Individual volumes $12.95).

This new commentary, the American edition of the British *The People's Bible Commentary,* is written by well known scholars from many denominations. Some have authored scholarly commentaries earlier on the books they treat here, e. g. James D. G. Dunn on Romans. Each book is divided into small sections; Acts, for example, has 87 divisions. Each division is given two pages of comment and concludes with brief suggestions for prayer or reflection. Each volume begins with a brief discussion of introductory material (authorship, occasion, etc.), and some provide a bibliography of resource materials.

This set belongs in parish libraries; each volume both informs and challenges readers to learn and reflect on the biblical message. It is a marvelous addition to our resources for biblical knowledge and personal devotion. *Edgar Krentz*

John E. Wilson's ***Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition*** (Westminster John Knox Press, $29.95) surveys German theology from Kant to Pannenberg and Jüngel. Along the way he includes discussions of Whitehead, Tillich, Reinhard and Richard Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Useful for understanding the state of theological research today. A good read. *Edgar Krentz*

In ***The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*** (Erdmans, $20)**,** Larry W. Hurtado examines manuscripts used by early Christians as artifacts that reveal aspects of early Christianity: the earliest texts of Old and New Testament; the preference for the codex over the scroll; the use of *nomina sacra* (abbreviations for sacred names); the staurogram (the chi–rho as the earliest symbol of the cross), and the size of codices. It is not a work of textual criticism, but of theological and social history. Hurtado includes a table of 246 second and third century manuscripts (92 OT; 85 NT, and 49 other texts—plus a few from the fourth century). This clearly written, interesting book illuminates an otherwise overlooked source for early Christian culture and faith. *Edgar Krentz*

Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*.* Edited by Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Eerdmans, $35.00). I found this book refreshing and perceptive, although uneven in quality and insight. Colleagues and students of Alex R. G. Deasley (Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, U.K.) dedicated to him these twenty essays that cover various Qumran and NT texts. Together, they assert that holiness in the NT is communal and involves embodying God's holiness publicly in particular settings. Implicitly, they reject a view of holiness based primarily on individual piety and morality, independent of God, and characterized by withdrawal from the world. The contribution by Richard Bauckham on holiness in John's gospel is especially helpful to distinguish and relate holiness and purity. For those inclined to see holiness as private piety, this book offers a corrective. For those unfamiliar or shy about holiness in the NT, it is an enriching experience. *Peter S. Perry,*

Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life's seven chapters (Eerdmans, $13.00), by Mark Powell, are a readable guide to a life of stewardship. Each chapter ends with good questions for discussion and a good bibliography that will provide additional resources for the leader. This book deserves a place in parish libraries and wide use. *Edgar Krentz*

In ***St. Paul's Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology*** (Liturgical Press, $29.95), Jerome Murphy-O'Connor does three things: 1. Cites and comments on dozens of ancient references to Ephesus, arranged in alphabetical order in 180 pages. The result is a mass of information that is difficult to access; 2. Briefly describes the excavated monuments that were in Ephesus when Paul visited there; 3. Reconstructs the Paul's ministry in Ephesus. M-O. posits three letters to Philippi from Ephesus. He argues that the Judaizers Paul contends with in Galatia were a delegation from Antioch that regarded Paul's churches as their daughter foundations and felt that Paul did not give them full information about Jesus. *Edgar Krentz*

The Festschrift in honor of the Jesuit scholar Francis T. Gignac, ***Studies in the Greek Bible*** (CBQ monograph series 44; The Catholic Biblical Association of America, $18.00) contains 13 essays, three on the Greek text of Genesis, three on deutero-canonical books (Daniel, Judith, and Maccabees), four on NT texts, and three linguistic studies. The bibliography of Gignac's writings shows that his major interest was in Greek grammar and linguistics, especially dealing with Greek papyri from Egypt. Most of the articles here reflect that interest and thus are a fitting tribute to Gignac's scholarly corpus. *Edgar Krentz*

Preaching Helps

Lectionary 18 (Proper 13)—Lectionary 26 (Proper 21)

A Time to Keep Silence and a Time to Speak

On February 19, 2009, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality released the proposed social statement on human sexuality, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," and the "Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies." You can find both documents at http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx. The ELCA Church Council is expected to transmit its recommendations on these statements to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, August 17-23, 2009, in Minneapolis. The assembly will consider both the recommended proposed social statement with impending resolutions and the ministry policy recommendation. I surely believe that the Holy Spirit may work so clearly and powerfully in the churchwide assembly that observers later say, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). However, I suspect that, regardless of how the Spirit works and what the churchwide assembly decides, some, whether in the assembly, the ELCA, the greater church, or in society, will be disappointed, even angry. And I suspect some in our congregations will be struggling as well.

Preachers might feel compelled to preach, and congregants might demand to hear, a sermon on human sexuality, and particularly the rostered leadership of persons living in committed same sex relationships, on Sundays, August 16 and 23. I'd like to propose an alternative strategy. The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7). I propose that preachers and congregations should decide that the Sundays before and after the churchwide assembly are not times to speak to the issue of human sexuality, except for praying for the churchwide assembly on August 16 and the whole church on August 23. Sermons on these Sundays ought to be a bold, clear and unambiguous proclamation of the gospel, to testify that, as the ELCA Constitution says, "the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, [is] the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world."

Even as they decide not to preach on the issue of human sexuality on the Sundays that bookend the churchwide assembly, I propose that preachers and congregations decide, before anything else is decided, when they are going to preach about this issue and discuss it as faith communities. One possibility for preaching such a sermon is Sunday, September 27. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, while there is "a time to keep silence," there is also "a time to speak." Michael Fick, who authored this series of preaching helps, observes the readings for this Sunday (Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5:13-20; and Mark 9:38-50) speak to the structure and authority of leadership in the church, and our desire to know with certainty who has the authority to do what and why. These readings can help us to wrestle with the question of how we can achieve some common understanding of how, and by whom, ministry is carried out. Pastor Fick observes that the priesthood of all believers is prefigured in these readings. Moses longs for all the people to be seized by the spirit with spiritual gifts to share, and Jesus warns in the most graphic terms of the danger of placing barriers between people and the works they would do in his name. At the same time, these readings affirm the variety of gifts carried out by those identified by the community at large. Eldad and Medad's perfectly valid ministry did not negate the role of the called seventy in leadership. Nor did the acts performed in Jesus' name replace the calling of the twelve in the ministry of accompaniment in which they served. James reminds us that different gifts produce different kinds of ministry.

Setting "a time to keep silence" and "a time to speak" well in advance of the churchwide assembly proclaims that the gospel rather than any single issue defines the church. It gives people the opportunity, even obligation, to pray and listen before they respond and speak. Finally, a sermon that speaks to the issues of human sexuality and rostered leadership can grow from the appointed Scripture readings, rather than being imposed upon them.

Remember that, no matter how effective they are, sermons alone will neither satisfy people nor settle issues. Preaching works in partnership with worship, fellowship, Bible study, relationships, outreach and social justice as people are formed by and witness to the gospel. Congregations need opportunities to share, process, and respond.

Michael Fick has served as pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Denver, Colorado, since 2004. A 2004 M.Div. graduate of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he also holds a BA in English and humanities from Valparaiso University (2000). Michael serves a 70-year-old, multi-generational congregation in central Denver, where he preaches almost every week. Michael was among my first batch of advisees at LSTC and I was honored to preach at his ordination. He is a diligent student of Scripture with a heart for God's people and a passion for the Church's work of doing justice in the world. I am most pleased to share Michael's reflections with you.

As you read these pages, I will be identifying contributors to "Preaching Helps" for the coming liturgical year. As always, I welcome your suggestions, nominations, and indications of your own willingness to write. For more information, visit my web page and click the FAQs tab. In the meantime, please join me in praying for the church!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor of Preaching Helps
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Proper 13
Lectionary 18
August 2nd, 2009

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
Psalm 78:23-29
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

First Reading

Following the feeding narrative and his walking on the water, Jesus begins his Bread of Life discourse for the remainder of John 6.

The Exodus text and the psalm set the stage for a discussion of God's provision for the people. The traveling Hebrews are disgruntled with their leaders, and revisionist history abounds. The people remember having enough to eat, but seem less realistic about the conditions of slavery under which they toiled in Egypt. The pressing reality of hunger has made the memory sweeter than the actual reality at the time. In response, God makes a daily provision of meat and bread, but with a test: will the people take only what they need and trust the promise?

Ephesians 4 continues the admonition that Gentile Christian communities mature in the unity of the body. We can assume there were issues to be addressed in these early communities. A variety of unorthodox teachings (vs. 14) led to a lack of unity in purpose and function (vs. 4 and 15), and resulted in a squandering of gifts that tries the patience of those offering this teaching (vs. 2).

Finally, John 6 continues with an encounter between Jesus and those presumably following him after witnessing the feeding of the multitude. Quickly, they are asking for a sign like the one discussed in Exodus and the Psalm. They want more bread. Apparently, their eating of literal bread has not been a fully convincing sign, or, their hunger is moving them to bait Jesus into feeding them again. Jesus addresses their need by responding to a series of questions that begin in this section. First, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" (vs. 25) The formulation ϖότε could mean, as in the NRSV, *when* in the chronological sense, but also communicates *how long*, perhaps suggesting a desire to know how to find Jesus again, so their needs may be consistently met. Second, the people ask how they might also perform the works of God, so they might produce bread for themselves (vs. 28). Third, they explicitly ask for another sign or work to confirm Jesus' identity and feed them once again (vs. 30). Jesus' responses start the bread of life discourse that continues in the coming weeks. Jesus responds: don't work for perishable things. "I am the bread of life." I am that which you truly seek.

Pastoral Reflection

The Bread of Life discourse in John 6 has the potential to induce the preacher's (and the assembly's) cry: not another bread sermon! These sections of the text, however, feature the use of the concept of "bread of life" evolving in complexity and content. The readings from Ephesians and the Hebrew scriptures over the next few weeks offer opportunities for nuance as well.

Every community has a narrative or narratives it tells itself about who it has been, is, and hopefully will become. In the parish I serve, we have occasionally held a "human scavenger hunt" as a means by which to welcome new members. In this activity, those with a long association with the congregation are posted around the church, and the new members and others take a walking tour.

At each location throughout the building, the elders among us tell the story of the congregation. The benefits are interpersonal interaction and connection between generations, and a “passing on” of the community’s shared story that helps newcomers to feel part of the unfolding history of the assembly.

I have observed, however, that occasionally a new member will come and ask me to clarify some point. It seems memory is variable. The events described by two long-time members might be similar or even identical; their interpretations of what the events mean can vary significantly. At first, this concerned me. However, I came to realize that this is the only way it could be. What we think about past events depends a lot on how we feel about the present and what we hope for the future.

The Hebrews of the Exodus remember fleshpots and full stomachs. What of the enslavement that accompanied them? Not such an important part of the institutional memory in the face of present hunger and an uncertain future. Lasting liberation loses attraction in the face of immediate want. And, no doubt, the community addressed in the epistle is composed of folks who think they remember clearly the teaching they’ve received, even if agreement upon what that teaching means has become less clear and their unity is imperiled.

When the crowds following Jesus catch him and ask “When?” and “how long?” Jesus knows what they are really seeking. They want him to stay put and meet their immediate and recurring need for bread. Perhaps they are asking: when will you stop moving and stay where and how we need you to be? They are hoping Jesus will repeat the feeding sign so they might eat their fill. Jesus is more interested in imperishable bread, the bread that is his very self. Their vision of Jesus as material-provider and need-meeter will not be met this time, but his teaching continues nonetheless.

These readings address our communities as well. What is the accepted historical mythology of a group? What is the minority report? Do we chase down Jesus asking for the bread we want on our own terms? And like the people in the wilderness, do we really trust God to provide a future? When Jesus says he is the bread of life, he is failing to meet the need being demanded of him, but promising something more. The cross and, later, the table fulfill creation’s need, empowering the disciples to then meet the physical needs of the neighbor. Even if the crowd does not yet understand the meaning of these signs of God’s reign. MF

Proper 14
Lectionary 19
August 9, 2009

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:1-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

First Reading
Elijah’s mantle is heavy in this reading from 1 Kings, and he feels more than lonely and rejected in his efforts to demonstrate the Lordship of his God to those who worshiped Baal. Elijah wishes to lay down and be left to die. God has need of Elijah’s ministry, so an angel prods him against his instincts to eat and drink, in order to prepare him for the forty-day journey to Horeb and beyond.

The Ephesian epistle continues from the previous week. Imitating God, these Gentile followers are to turn away from hatred toward one another, and more, to not allow their anger at mistreatment by their neighbors to rob them of the inheritance they have in Christ. The first emotional response they experience in response to their neighbors and one another will not bear witness to the faith within them. The community must feel, yes, even anger, but act in accordance with the faith of their calling.

The omitted section of the gospel reading (vs. 36-40) finds Jesus addressing the crowd about why he has been sent to walk among them. No one will be rejected who comes to Jesus in faith. He is to draw all who "see" and "believe" to himself, creating a balance between choice and call in the experience. The related concepts of seeing, hearing, learning, and believing in John are in the context of God's call. In this reading John uses the word ἑλκύσῃ (to be drawn or dragged) (vs. 44), indicating the will of the divine in the experience of being drawn, even dragged to faith in Jesus.

This section of John 6 ends with Jesus elaborating that his being the bread of life is indeed for the nourishment of believers. And that nourishment is his flesh. This explanation of flesh begins next week's gospel reading as well.

Pastoral Reflection

As a new, first-time godparent, I have been observing the rhythms of an infant more closely then ever before. Sleeping and eating are her "ultimate concern" at the moment. And I have been fascinated to notice that while she instinctively knows she needs both sustenance and rest to grow and thrive, she needs some prodding when it comes to the timing of it all. Often, she would prefer to sleep through a feeding, especially in these first weeks of her life, and so her parents lovingly but insistently must wake her to nurse. The role of an attentive parent is key in establishing rhythms that make us whole and well, even if we are not aware of what it is we really need and when.

This is Elijah's need as he flees from the failure and carnage of a witness to his God that a queen cannot accept, after her priests of Baal die by Elijah's order. Elijah has given all for the mission to which he is called, and now feels only like curling up in death. "All I want," I can imagine him saying to that pesky angel, "All I want is to be left alone." Our human failing drives us to the same conclusion all too often. But God, who parents via an angel in this instance, knows that Elijah truly will not survive the forty-day ordeal ahead if he is not roused to eat and be sustained. God must and does work against Elijah's present desires for his ultimate well-being. Like my little goddaughter, Elijah needs God's care to weather a season of weariness and emerge strong and ready to serve once again.

As infants grow, they gain more control over how and when to meet their own needs. Yet, even as adults, our awareness of when and how to be nourished remains in need of guidance. The communities addressed in the epistle are responding to their time of trial in a knee-jerk fashion, with the most human of emotions. Anger, wrath, and all the rest must be put to death if a witness to Christ is to persist.

Even when we get what we think we need, it may not ultimately satisfy our deepest longing. Jesus is awakening the crowd that seeks loaves to their need of his flesh if they are to be his body in the world. Drawn and dragged, seeing, hearing, learning and believing will call this crowd to a life together that they cannot yet comprehend, and that many will find unbearable. The complaints of some seem reasonable. Jesus being the Anointed One doesn't connect with what they know about his background and their beliefs about the Messiah.

Like Elijah under the tree and the Christians addressed in the epistle, that crowd, and our crowd, and my little goddaughter, need the parenting of God to be knit together, to grow and mature into the body. Jesus' persistence in this discourse opens for preaching an opportunity. As followers of Jesus, how does Jesus parent us as a body to give us what we need? And more importantly, are we seeing, hearing, learning and believing what God is guiding us to become? What satiates us may feed our wants for this life, but not the eternal life to which Jesus draws, even drags us. Need of nourishment calls us to the table, to feast on the bread of life, Jesus' own flesh and blood. MF

Proper 15
Lectionary 20
August 16, 2009

Proverbs 9:1-6
Psalm 34:9-14
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

First Reading
The Wisdom of God calls her guests to a feast of rich meat and wine, food and drink that are symbolic of the simple or uninformed gaining in knowledge and maturity.

A wise (σοφός) community life is marked by responsibility, accountability, worship, and thanksgiving. The Ephesian epistle moves into a beautiful description of this life together in the body of Christ. A community of wisdom is joyous rather than debauched, singing its faith in the face of persecutions and even hatred; a community that worships and fellowships through evil days.

The third installment of the bread of life discourse in John 6 elaborates on Jesus' flesh-eating call. To eat his flesh and drink his blood is to receive a promise to be raised up on the last day. No doubt, such a declaration is confusing, if not repulsive to many listening. This is true of our assemblies as well, as we search to locate our understanding of the Eucharist within the graphic call of Jesus to "eat me."

This repeated call to eat Jesus' σάρξ (flesh) appears over and again as a matter of much debate in the commentaries. Some treat it as an elaborated section intended to bring the Eucharist squarely into the heart of John's gospel by later editors who found it missing. Others argue that this section is not really about the Eucharist at all, but symbolizes the intensity of belief to which Jesus is calling the crowds. Some believe these distinctions are artificial.

Wherever one may fall on this interpretive spectrum, this preacher will do well to remember that the assembly is seeking to make some sense of the mystery of faith connected to the Sacrament in which they are about to participate. Eating and drinking Jesus rather than the bread or manna of our usual meals digs deep into the emotional heart of worship in many traditions. Further, the allusions to worship and community life in the epistle offer a rather complete opportunity to address the question: what are we really doing here? What is the role of every piece of the liturgy in shaping our life together around this word and the sacrament it draws us into?

One approach is to cast the questions asked by "the Jews" (Judeans) in the crowd as the questions we bring, acknowledged or otherwise, into a worship experience. In the previous reading from John, Jesus is asked how he can be "from heaven" and yet the child of known human people. In this section, the crowd asks, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" How indeed…Casting these questions as ours acknowledges the assembly's unity in seeking truth and wisdom in the liturgy, and presents an excellent opportunity to discuss what we mean when we say "the body of Christ, given for you."

Pastoral Reflection

I serve a parish populated by many folks who were not raised in a Lutheran congregation. Many others have transplanted west from all kinds of Lutheran traditions and backgrounds. Still others have come to faith later in life, being native to an increasingly secular, or at least unaffiliated, western religious sensibility. The gift of this kind of community is the opportunity to make catechesis a constant activity. Some are encountering theology and liturgy for the first time. All of us are encountering Jesus. And even those of us who come with a liturgical sensibility become quickly aware that worship, even among cradle Lutherans and other Christians, takes on a wide range of forms, styles, and underlying theological and historical experiences.

A well-placed reference to the gift of music and musicians in setting the tone for word and sacrament is appropriate here as well. I find it too easy to let weeks go by accepting the gratitude of the assembly for my role in the liturgy without encouraging them to acknowledge the equally critical contributions of others. As music is a central sign of Christian community in the Ephesians text, naming the contribution of those among us who have this work as their calling feels more than appropriate.

The 2009 Churchwide assembly opens August 17, 2009. The Ephesians and Proverbs texts offer an opportunity to note this in ELCA congregations, and to encourage prayers for our church as it gathers in assembly.

While preaching on the Eucharist is an opportunity throughout these weeks in the Bread of Life discourse, these texts together provide an especially rich catechetical preaching opportunity through John 6.

Eating and drinking the flesh and blood of the Son of Humanity imparts gifts of grace. By these means, we are promised life within us, eternal life and resurrection on the last day, and an abiding life in and with Jesus. Jesus is being explicit now. The wisdom of God and the sustaining bread given as manna come to their deepest understanding, are even transformed and displaced, in communion with the very flesh and blood of Jesus.

In a conversation led a couple of years ago, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson urged a group of first-call pastors—including me—from all over the West and Southwest to consider giving up insider language, or at least always explain what we mean by the words we use. I think it a worthy challenge in any context. If the gospel is "good news," then say so, and say what is meant by good news. If we were to ask the assembly what we mean by eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, as a foretaste of life eternal, what responses would we hear? I suspect a range not unlike the debate among the leading scholars on this text. Is flesh literal, symbolic, or something else? What does it mean that Jesus is "really" present, and for me? What beliefs lie in, with, and under our assembly's gathering for the meal? Jesus invites the crowd into just such a vulnerable, transformative dialogue, and invites us into the same. MF

Proper 16
Lectionary 21
Sunday, August 23, 2009

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

First Reading

In assembling the leaders and people of Israel, Joshua is asking them to recall God's faithfulness and turn away from the gods and idols that now jeopardize the covenant relationship. The time has come for the people to name whom they will serve, even if the costs are high. There is benefit in conformity. The people of the covenant know this in their own narrative, when it was easier to serve the gods of Egypt and the oppressor. Now, the temptation returns in a new land with a new selection of gods and peoples with whom to assimilate.

In the closing address, the letter to the Ephesians rouses the churches to a similar steadfastness in the face of overwhelming odds. But this battle for identity and even survival will be fought with an arsenal provided as fruits of the Spirit.

Jesus concludes the bread of life discourse by so thoroughly offending the crowd with the invitation to eat his flesh that most of them leave. The teaching is "difficult," but that term doesn't translate the depth of their offense. Σκληρός is "difficult," but bears within it the intolerable, even the grating. The term almost seems violent in its dismissal of Jesus' claims.

Having lost the crowd's affections by not providing the bread they sought, and in fact offering his flesh as new but intolerable nourishment, Jesus addresses these same reactions in even his closest disciples. The Jesus we meet in John's gospel is so committed to the truth of his calling and identity so as to be uncompromising. His compassion remains, but his trajectory is clear. Jesus is the bread of life that brings life in his flesh and blood. Being drawn or dragged as believers to that confession will cost not only material and physical security, but ideological and theological security as well. Many choose to turn away from Jesus, and God's calling, in light of this teaching.

Pastoral Reflection

"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Many will experience this sliver from Joshua as a top-ten verse of Christian merchandising, rivaled perhaps only by the ubiquitous John 3:16. And while tiresome and out of context in many instances, the attraction to the display of such a verse usually has a genuine, if sentimental, motivation. To declare an identity as an act of faith is edifying; it ties us to an allegiance that demonstrates our commitments to the world.

Living out those commitments beyond the words of a verse displayed is decidedly more complicated. Joshua's meeting rallies the people to the cause of faithfulness, but only after many have presumably abandoned the covenant for the gods of this still-new land. The story of God's faithfulness is compelling. The distinctiveness of the Israelites among the peoples around them no doubt attracts attention, attention that some would prefer to avoid for the comfort of acceptability.

To put on the armor of God is another tough-sounding invitation, but the uncertainty with which the imprisoned-Pauline author leaves these communities is very real. Ephesians ends by arming small and vulnerable communities with weapons of the Spirit with which to promote this "gospel of peace." The odds are long that all of them will survive, and survive faithfully, in the societies in which they find themselves. The disciples, who seem the only ones left willing to eat and drink of Jesus as the way to know eternal life, must consider that the crowds of followers Jesus once attracted will no longer bear the calling of God to faith with them. All of these readings address communities of faith in danger of disappearing rather than claiming the way of the cross as their own.

As the Churchwide Assembly draws to a close this day, it is difficult to advise how to incorporate the events of the previous week into the day's preaching in ways that are contextually appropriate. (Clearly, this applies to those of us serving in ELCA contexts). Depending on the decisions made or not made, different communities and individuals will be experiencing a range of emotions. Many will simply be unaware of what has been going on in the previous week. The end of this section of John offers an opportunity to reflect on the confession we make to one another as a family of faith. And if there is anxiety, the readings allow us to dwell with those first disciples in their experience of following Jesus in anxious days, sustained by faith in Jesus the Christ.

What leads from the question, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" to the confession, "We have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God."? Simon Peter and the disciples' need to stay and follow is demonstrative of God's call. What has drawn the assembly into worship? Perhaps some are drawn by compelling faith, a desire to be equipped to stand firm, or a deep need to eat and drink Jesus, who is the Word. Or, maybe, family commitments, social acceptability, friendships or even habit and obligation are more compelling. Most of us experience some mix of the aforementioned.

Once we have been drawn, for whatever reason, to stick around, what will we find? What good news will find us, and open our hearts to confess Jesus as the Holy One of God? The Bread of Life discourse of John 6 has been building to this moment. After one lets go of what one expected, after one has negotiated to get real and perceived needs met, after questions have been asked and answered in shocking fashion, and after others have fallen away in offense, only one encounter can compel us not to "wish to go away"—the encounter with Jesus, the only one to whom we can go because of the inexplicable gift of his very self: Word, Flesh, and Blood.

And of course those disciples, and we, fail to keep our commitments and confess our faith. We too "go away" from Jesus because we find the teaching too hard or the cost too high. What kind of invitation can God work through our proclamation? Through us, can the uncertain crowd, and we, confess again that Jesus is Bread from Heaven, given for you and for me? MF

Proper 17
Lectionary 22
Sunday, August 30, 2009

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

First Reading

This Sunday, the lectionary shifts us back to Mark's gospel, where the profound simplicity of this evangelist's voice stands in contrast to John. Time spent in Ephesians also ends, moving instead to

James who, in a new voice, raises similar concern for communal relationships and witness to the broader society.

The excerpts from Deuteronomy provide a warning about the life-taking consequences of forgetting or adding to God's law. Harsh in tone, the text demands that the received tradition not be forsaken, manipulated, or molded to the fleeting desires of the moment. All the same, the law is not only for Israel's well-being. Observance is a witness, a tangible means by which all people will be drawn to faith (vs. 6 and, later, 20). Additionally, passing the identity of people of law and covenant to the next generation is an immediate concern. It is through this observance that children will claim the identity of Israel into perpetuity.

James sometimes lumbers under the weight of some Lutheran bias on my part. Too easily, the phrase "epistle of straw" comes to mind. While theologically challenging in some ways, when read in conversation with the gospel, there is helpful, even corrective good news here. The letter insists that faith without palpable concern for the neighbor and a witness to those around is dangerously complacent. By what sign is the faith of the church known to the world around? A common confession is addressed here: "We confess that we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Self-deception about our relationships and witness leads us away from Jesus.

Mark's gospel is rejoined in Jesus' interaction with religious authorities. This gospel converses with the Deuteronomy text in that the Pharisees, zealous keepers of the law, find themselves corrected by Jesus' teaching, as he judges them to be self-deceiving. What defiles is not a lack of adherence to law per se, but rather what is cultivated in the heart. An example of how the Pharisees had skirted the law is omitted from the appointed reading, and then the sewer example of what enters the heart versus the mouth is (unfortunately) omitted as well. That which is κοινός, common or ritually unclean, is presented not in legalistic or moralistic terms. Jesus is concerned with the heart, that which animates and motivates our actions. Intention is what makes one clean or unclean, hence Mark's reporting that Jesus will break the letter of the law to uphold its spirit (healing on the Sabbath, for example). Defilement by intention liberates people to act mercifully, but also convinces every heart of its need for grace and forgiveness.

Pastoral Reflection

The cultivation of faith in our children and surrounding community is timely as a theme in places where schools may be starting back for fall classes. The passing on of faith is a shared task. What are the practices around faith formation in our assemblies, and can these readings be fruitful ground on which to explore the formation of people of faith of all ages?

All this begins for me with dirty hands. The Pharisees note immediately that Jesus' disciples are eating without having washed in accordance with the tradition of the elders. They are looking for a reason to dismiss these people, rather than looking for a reason to welcome them. This experience initiates Jesus' rebuke of their teaching. Discerning the work and faith of those dirty hands and hearts should come first. How do we engage in snap judgments about people without first knowing their hearts?

Being "doers of the word" could be summarized as demonstrating the faith within us. The law demands a living out of covenant relationship, but always with an eye to giving the gift of faith to those around. In contrast, the Pharisees in Mark have taken to observing laws and ordinances for their own sake. By these means, they might take life away from those that can be labeled as unclean, unworthy, and unobservant. It is this interpretation of the law that motivates Jesus' interaction with them, and with us. Traditions, rules, and policies are one thing. They keep us safe in community, and they demonstrate for the children among us and to the world around us the way that God shapes us for greater love and service to the neighbor.

But if the Christian community's teaching and observances become little more than a measure by which some may be declared unclean, Jesus steps in with a stern correction. He wants to know the heart from which observance flows.

It is both exciting and frightening to observe the law in this gospel way. Knowing the heart and intentions of those around us means risking relationship. It also means we have to look hard at ourselves and question our own intentions. The alternative, of course, is unexamined hypocrisy.

The idea of addition to and subtraction from the law makes a great difference in what the Pharisees, and too often we, are up to here. There is a conflation of the practices of the elders with God's will for the community. The question posed is not whether the disciples have been serving others with their hands, and making a witness to the faith within them. The only question the Pharisees are interested in is why they haven't washed those hands before eating. Jesus suggests, especially with the omitted text in mind, that ritually clean hands that show no mercy or love are less pleasing to God than dirty hands involved in the reign he has come to announce. MF

Proper 18
Lectionary 23
September 6, 2009

Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-10 [11-13], 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

First Reading

Isaiah's prophecy addresses those in exile in Babylon, for whom the transformation of all things shall be a mark of liberation. Living that hope, they might cling to their identity, assured that they will not be abandoned by their God. That transformation of circumstance, the prophet promises, will be exemplified even in the transformation of the senses and the landscape itself. When God's promises are fulfilled, everything changes.

It is that change in the experience of the world that motivates James' warnings about favoritism toward the wealthy. As a transformative community, it is expected that those relegated to places of little honor and even disgrace elsewhere will be afforded abundant love and respect in the community of faith. The alternative is a lip-service faith that ignores the reality of people's lives. Because "mercy triumphs over judgment" on God's part (because we cannot hope to keep the whole law), the church should strive to reflect the same values. We might answer James' question: yes, faith is enough to save. And we also heed the correction that faith is not only confessed with the lips, but demonstrated in a just community seeking dignity for every human person.

The gospel has two parts, and is a turning point near the heart of Mark. Jesus has his first encounter with a Gentile, a woman of Syrophoenecian background, and later, with a man who is deaf. The woman's situation is transformed in her daughter's healing, but one could say Jesus' ministry is transformed by the experience as well. Whether it is for the benefit of the disciples or surprising to Jesus himself, this woman's fierce love for her child overcomes every barrier between her and Jesus. Her gender, station, background, religion…all these label her a "dog" among Jesus' people. But her heart and its intentions move Jesus to compassion, and he and his disciples proclaim the good news among the gentiles from here forward.

The next encounter is with a man who is deaf. Jesus transforms his senses, but not as a spectacle. Alone, Jesus gives this man a status his culture has unjustly denied him, restoring him to community. Jesus does all these things καλῶς (well), but more than "correct" in the technical or skillful sense (although that, too); Jesus acts honorably and justly.

Pastoral Reflection

It can be hard not to have favorites, especially favorites who reinforce what we already believe. Jesus has completed his confrontation with the Pharisees regarding defilement as what flows from people's hearts rather than their outward situation. He must now demonstrate that teaching in action, with regard to those even more marked for exclusion than those having unwashed hands.

It is comfortable to have affinity for those we understand out of our own experiences. James confronts the unproductive faith of a community that honors people not for the real person, but for what they bring into the assembly. Many qualities might appeal to us in addition to wealth: a standing in a community that matters to us, a racial or ethnic identity, a language, a particular sensibility about politics or even music. The risky work of the gospel demands a maturation beyond these aesthetics. I love it when I hear my own biases about church, theology, politics, and liturgy returned to me by those who agree. It is tempting for any of us, or our assemblies, to offer those familiar persons a place of particular honor among us.

This leads to a self-imposed spiritual exile, a Babylon of the familiar. When Jesus encounters the Syrophoenician woman, it is expected that he will dismiss her request on her daughter's behalf, and he does, in terms that make us very uncomfortable. To refer to her and her people as dogs is not politically correct in these days; but what actions on our part belie our unspoken beliefs about those who differ from us?

Jesus addresses the need of the man whose hearing and language make him outcast and even in danger in his society. Jesus lays his hands on the man not as a spectacle for the crowd's benefit (the messianic secret is still in play), but for the benefit of a man whose life may depend on it. In both parts of the gospel reading, Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd have their senses and sensibilities transformed as well. Here is good news for all people, not just those marked as chosen or given places of honor outside the religious system. As he will on the cross, Jesus transforms the instruments of death and oppression into signs that God's reign will look very different than human systems, and Jesus calls us to experience and participate in that transformation. These things are done "well" precisely because they are difficult and transform the lives of people.

What are a few of our favorite things, as the song goes? And in our affinity for these people or things, how is the cross concealed? Jesus and the disciple's ministry is transformed by a woman and man whose hearts cry out for understanding, dignity, and respect. It is for these that Jesus must experience the ultimate humiliation, so that humiliation might be transformed—so that the feared and excluded might be known as favorite, beloved, and precious. MF

Proper 19
Lectionary 24
September 13, 2009

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116:1-9
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

First Reading

Isaiah's suffering servant of God provided a place wherein the earliest Christian communities could engage Jesus alongside a received tradition. This servant demonstrates God's love and mercy by aligning himself with people who suffer and not seeking vengeance for the wrong done to him. In so doing, dignity and righteousness are disconnected from the exercise of power and outward circumstance. Isaiah's suffering servant cannot be put to shame because he is filled with the dignity of walking in the path to which God has called him. It is no wonder, with so many glorious expectations surrounding the coming of the Messiah, that the followers of Jesus identified him with the servant, whose dying and rising destroy death with humility rather than violence.

James continues in instruction about a right manner of life, this time turning to the point of unexamined speech. The tongue betrays because it is so hard to control, and capable of doing so much damage. We cannot as followers of Jesus expect to be perfect in speech, but self-control can keep us from cursing our fellow human beings. Our speech should build up, not tear down, communicating the faith within us.

The middle of Mark is here in the acknowledgement of the open Messianic secret. And with this identity comes the revelation of the suffering to come. The words Χριστός (anointed one) and Σατανᾶς (adversary) act as foils. The very same information that will define Jesus' messianic identity (suffering, dying, and rising) is the same unbearable information that makes Peter an enemy of the reign of God in this instance. It is satanic, that is, opposed to God's will, to wish to save Jesus or ourselves—to make an end-run around the cross and arrive at glory.

Pastoral Reflection

Who do people say that Jesus is? I have been reflecting on the responses I hear, and sometimes even believe, in response to this question. Rarely do I hear names of prophets past as Jesus' disciples offer. Instead, the range of answers is vast. Some examples: Jesus is a relic, a tired concept based loosely on some long-ago discredited religion. Jesus is the name Christians use to try and oppress others. Jesus is a talisman, a magic word that can be used to try and make things that I want to happen. Jesus is a nice guy, a moral prophet that demonstrates one of many honorable ways of moving through the world. Jesus is my dear and personal friend and savior who takes care of me as long as I am good. Jesus is part of my national and ethnic identity and a cultural icon. Jesus is someone I used to think I knew, but I've matured beyond that now…

In Mark's gospel, Peter gets it right, and all wrong at the same time. He acknowledges Jesus as Messiah, the anointed one, but then demands that Jesus conform to his expectations. Whatever those expectations are, they do not include suffering and death!

What was the quality of Peter's rebuke? It may have been instructional, reminding Jesus of all the ways that the suffering he was describing did not fit Peter's messianic expectation. But a sort of academic rebuke misses an implied and understandable emotional response in Peter to what he has just heard. Jesus' words are more than Peter can bear. I can imagine Peter feels that this little band of followers is about to be abandoned, and will be denied the participation in the glorious transformation of all things that will end suffering and struggle. How will suffering and death fulfill the messianic promise to transform this messy world? Peter must rebuke these ideas. They mean the death of almost everything he believes.

Jesus' counter-rebuke reorients Peter and us. What expectations about Jesus do we bring with us into the experience of word and sacrament? What rebukes of Jesus and one another surround those expectations? It is difficult to pick up the cross if we have not first put down, or been made to put down, other expectations of the faith.

In Tim O'Brien's semi-autobiographical work *The Things They Carried*, the author examines his own experience of the Vietnam War in a crucifying way. He talks about all the things he and his comrades carried with them into and out of the war as soldiers. Some are physical things like love letters, ammunition, and food. Other things are carried in the heart, like childhood expectations, fallen friends, missed opportunities, love, hate, and misplaced trust. And as the main character matures, sometimes with great difficultly given the harshness of his experience, he must rebuke others and be rebuked, and stop carrying some burdens so he can pick up others.

What beliefs, actions, traditions, or experiences must we as communities of faith be rebuked into putting down so we might pick up the cross and follow Jesus? How do the things we carry, even if long-held and well-meaning, sometimes make us an enemy of the work Jesus is trying to carry out in our midst and through our hands? These things we carry may be self-deceptions about the health of the community. They may be ideas about who is welcome and why. They may be bits of piety around worship that no longer suit the context in which the assembly finds itself.

To carry the cross means Peter has to stop opposing Jesus and follow into the unexpected. The gift is that Jesus' death and resurrection promise to transform the things we fear and take away their power forever. Picking up the cross invites us not only to witness the change in the things and people around us, but also with ourselves. MF

Proper 20
Lectionary 25
September 20, 2009

Jeremiah 11:18-20
Psalm 54
James 3:13-4:3
Mark 9:30-37

First Reading

Jeremiah knows righteous indignation. The prophet laments that he has served the Lord with willingness, and has proclaimed as he has been instructed, and yet seems to find more and more suffering. His prayer, assured that those who oppose him will meet the Lord's vengeance, must be read carefully in the context of oppression. For those in our communities who genuinely know the systematic pain of having their voices dismissed, the justice of the law is good news, indeed. With Jeremiah, there is assurance that God is on the side of the suffering and opposes those who wield power unjustly. For those who wield such power, there is stern correction and warning here that should not be too easily spiritualized away.

James continues the conversation about just community by looking for the source of discord. The source is identified as the cravings at war within us and our hearts' willingness to do what is necessary to get what we want. The results, predictably, are terrible. We ask, but ask wrongly (κακῶς), signifying not only the procedure or how we ask, but the qualitative. We ask out of selfish motives or motivations, seeking not the well-being of the neighbor in our request, but only our own. The epistle suggests that God's people should not be surprised that these petitions are rejected by God. Here again, the theme of the heart's intention being the source of sinfulness and evil is reiterated.

Even after a rebuke in their denial of Jesus' destiny to suffer, die, and rise, the disciples still do not understand Jesus' teaching. And because they lack this understanding, their hearts turn on one another and to their relative positions of authority and power (greatness). Moreover, the disciples seem aware (vs. 32) that they aren't getting it, but are afraid to ask Jesus again what he means by taking up the cross and following. Their behavior toward one another, as in James, reveals their internal conflict. They do not yet understand how to pick up their cross and follow and have instead followed the heart's desire for recognition and standing within the group.

Jesus senses this in their reluctance to answer his question, and rephrases his teaching about the cross. To pick up the cross and follow is to put down the supremacy of self. Jesus calls the disciples to make service, rather than their perceived greatness, the mark of their authority.

Pastoral Reflection

"But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (Mark 9:32). When disciples don't understand Jesus' call on their lives, they turn inward to what they desire most for themselves.

There is perhaps no better image of the inclination of the human heart than a toddler melting down into a tantrum. I resist the urge to grin, especially when it happens in the midst of the assembly. Not because I find the embarrassment of a parent amusing, quite the opposite. I smile, inwardly, because such an event lets me experience my own inner monologue, now on display for all to witness. Toddlers and small children have an immediate sense of what they want and when they want it. And when they don't get it, the "old Adam" is on display for all to see.

I also appreciate the honesty of such a display, because as adults we develop all manner of more socially acceptable tantrums with which to address our unmet wants and desires. I am careful to mention here that the Jeremiah text provides an example of *righteous* indignation. The prophet's trust in God gives him a presence in the face of injustice that speaks truth to power and knows God will not abandon those in real need. This is very different than the adult tantrums being thrown in the community of James' epistle and in the midst of Jesus' disciples. These are the marks of the adult tantrum: one-upmanship; sarcasm; violent threats, acts, and words; the belittling of another; passive-aggression; and boasting.

Just as these very human tantrums threaten the unity of the community in the James epistle, so, too they obscure the mission of the disciples of Jesus. Devolving into a contest about who is greater, they do not understand the call to suffering that Jesus is now describing. We are not inclined to seek to be last, we are taught by the world always to seek to be first. And our church communities exhibit a culture of winners and losers that obscures our faith.

What are the socially acceptable tantrums in my life? How do I seek to be first at the expense of others? How does this obscure my calling as a follower of Jesus? For indignation is righteous when it seeks the well-being of the other. Discipleship is costly, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, and we cheapen grace when looking away from the cross of Christ and turn our attention to ourselves and our ambitions. This is to "ask wrongly." Blessedly, Jesus does not abandon his disciples as hopelessly lost, but bears with them as they mature and grow in faith, so they might be witnesses to the journey he now makes to Jerusalem. We are called to be just such witnesses, not because we are complete in faith and love, but because Jesus will not abandon us to our own impulses. MF

Proper 21
Lectionary 26
September 27, 2009

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Psalm 19:7-14
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

First Reading

The epistle of James closes with an admonition that the community hear one another's confession of sin and fulfill the functions for which they have been called. Some are called to pray, some to visit the sick, still others to praise. In doing this work, those outside the community may be restored. The "covering of sins" in the final sentence may refer to the one restored, or to the community as a whole. Shared responsibility leads to a healthier, more complete body of believers.

Numbers presents a vision of authority in communities of faith that complements the good news of the gospel text in thematic ways. Not unusually, the crisis for Moses begins with the grumbling of the people in his charge. They have manna now to eat and sustain them in their wilderness journey, but the revisionist history of their time enslaved in Egypt rears up and manna is no longer enough. The people now demand meat.

Moses is beside himself at this point. He wonders if he must carry these baby-people into the land himself and has no idea how to meet their meat need. In a Jonah-esque moment, he asks God to die rather than bear the burden of leadership alone any longer. So God gathers for him a roster of duly ordained, commissioned, and consecrated leaders to spread the responsibility of leadership. And the process of doing so seems satisfyingly orderly.

Joshua, assistant to Moses, though, receives word of unauthorized prophecy among the people on the part of Eldad and Medad. But to Joshua's surprise, Moses makes no fuss. The work of Eldad and Medad is of the spirit (vs. 26) and does not threaten the authorized leadership of the seventy elders. Rather, their ministry encourages and edifies. Moses only wishes the spirit would rest on all the people in such a way.

"Whoever is not against us is for us" (vs. 40) flies in the face of conventional wisdom for Jesus disciples as it does for us. The disciples have seen others doing works in Jesus' name, and are irritated because they have come to see themselves as the authorized representatives of Jesus. Perhaps they feel they have earned the right to ministry because of their toil.

But Jesus shuts down this line of thinking. The power to act in Jesus' name is not restricted, and indeed will serve to draw others to the community of faith. Jesus instructs his inner-circle not to be concerned about how others might be acting in his name, but rather to examine whether they are putting barriers between people and an encounter with Jesus.

The terms ἅλας (salt) and ἁλίζω (the verb of the same root, the act of applying salt or seasoning) figure in the last sentences of the passage. There are a variety of interpretations available here, but one suggestion is that Jesus is asking his disciples not to be tempted to judge the calling of others by putting a stumbling block before them. Rather, to be salted and flavorful means understanding one's own calling, acting accordingly, and being at peace with others as they pursue God's will in their lives. Otherwise, focus on one's calling is lost and we become bland in our proclamation, the flavor of faithfulness wasted in patrolling the ministry of others.

Pastoral Reflection

It seems that if underlying strains of disunity have emerged in our ELCA and other faith communities over the last years, at their root has been a difference in the view of the scripture, but also a variety of views about authority. As these same sources of conflict emerge with the individual and congregation, and apparently always have, it should be little wonder. The structure and authority of leadership, or the place of LGBT people within the church are the presenting realities of the day. But what is at work among us is a desire to know with certainty: who has the authority to do what? Why? And can we achieve some common understanding of how, and by whom, ministry is carried out?

Immediately, the priesthood of all believers is prefigured in these readings. Moses longs for all the people to be seized by the spirit with spiritual gifts to share, and Jesus warns in the most graphic terms the danger of placing barriers between people and the works they would do in his name. It seems that authority for the well-being of the neighbor is not a finite resource. There is enough Spirit for all to be claimed for works of ministry.

Moreover, such affirmation of work done in Christ's name is inherently evangelical. Jesus promises that even the giving of a cup of water is a holy calling. By these signs, no one will be able to speak against Jesus and those who act in his name.

But there is also an affirmation of the variety of gifts being carried out by those identified by the community at large. Eldad and Medad's perfectly valid ministry did not negate the role of the called seventy in leadership. Nor did the acts being performed in Jesus' name replace the calling of the twelve in the ministry of accompaniment in which they serve. James reminds us that different gifts produce different kinds of ministry. This is as it should be among God's people.

What are the signs of authority in our communities? How are gifts for ministry nurtured and called out among all the believers? What stumbling blocks need to be torn down? Where I serve we have been working to make our facility as barrier-free as possible, so all may serve physically in the space. We still have much work to do. But the spiritual version of the same question is as urgent: are our communities barrier-free with regard to gifts for ministry? How does God, in light of Jesus' works, and the death and resurrection to which he now speeds in Mark, point out millstones of our own making? Can we really believe: whoever is not against us is for us? MF

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