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Revitalizing Teaching
and Learning
in the Church

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Editors: **Kathleen D. Billman, Kurt K. Hendel, Craig L. Nesson**

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary
kbillman@lstc.edu, khendel@lstc.edu, cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu

Assistant Editor: **Ann Rezny**

arezny@lstc.edu

Copy Editor: **Connie Sletto**

Editor of Preaching Helps: **Craig A. Satterlee**

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
csatterl@lstc.edu

Editors of Book Reviews:

Ralph W. Klein (Old Testament)

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773-256-0773)
rklein@lstc.edu

Edgar M. Krentz (New Testament)

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773-256-0752)
ekrentz@lstc.edu

Craig L. Nesson (history, theology, ethics and ministry)

Wartburg Theological Seminary (563-589-0207)
cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu

Circulation Office: 773-256-0751

currents@lstc.edu

Editorial Board: **Michael Aune (PLTS), James Erdman (WTS), Robert Kugler (PLTS),
Kristine Stache (WTS), Vitor Westhelle (LSTC).**

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Revitalizing Teaching and Learning in the Church

A little over a decade ago, a lovely book of reflections on the vocation of the theological teacher was given to faculty members at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC).¹ This volume was the fruit of a rich collegial conversation on the art of teaching and learning in theological schools, a conversation that began in 1997 at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning among seventeen theological teachers and scholars. This conversation continued for two more summers when the group reconvened to continue the conversation. Written from different institutional and ecclesial contexts and from different disciplinary perspectives, the essays that resulted from that collegial conversation convey the authors' shared *love* for teaching and learning; the conviction that teaching is not solely a profession or position, but a *vocation*.

Returning to these essays from time to time helps us to reflect on our own callings as teachers. Reading about teaching from others who love teaching and have committed themselves to this complex art and discipline, can be inspiring. Thus, in hope that this issue can be a source of support and inspiration for all who serve as teachers of the faith and in celebration of those who are faithfully engaged in teaching and learning in church and academy, this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* highlights the role of the theological teacher in congregations, lay ministry formation endeavors, religiously affiliated colleges and universities, and theological seminaries. In various places in church and academy, faithful pilgrims commit themselves to convey not only *information* about the Christian faith but also to co-create the kind of learning "space" in which mutual transformation can occur.

Christine Wenderoth, co-editor of this issue, takes up a challenge experienced by many teachers in a rapidly changing world: how the digital age is challenging some of the traditional *methods* teachers have relied on to teach scripture and tradition. One of these primary methods has been nurturing students' capacity to read both empathically and critically. As "People of the Book" Christians are committed to *reading* as a means of transmitting and expanding the gospel. However, today reading practices are changing rapidly under the influence of digital technology, and people increasingly find traditional reading difficult to pursue. As pastors, Christian educators, and people of faith, Wenderoth argues that we need to be intentional about how and why we read,

1. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, eds., *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

and knowledgeable about how to encourage best practices of faithful reading. She offers some background and suggestions about how to create a community of good readers.

Churches often struggle with processes of adult Christian formation: how best to design and offer experiences of serious religious study in the congregation that not only inform participants of the Judeo-Christian faith narrative and traditions but also provide a context in which they seek to integrate their personal narratives and ethical choices with the Christian story. Not infrequently, this difficulty arises from a lack of understanding about the differences between instruction and faith formation. **Cathy Cowling** details a model of adult formation, *Education for Ministry*, and examines the insights it offers to those who explore what it means to live as adult Christians in the world today.

How do we read the Bible with children? What Bible or Bible story books are appropriate for different ages of children? **Elizabeth Caldwell** addresses these questions within the larger context of the spiritual formation of all God's children, even the adults who want help in reading the Bible with their children. Parents, pastors, and Sunday school teachers all want to know how best to approach this important topic, and Caldwell's essay provides rich guidance about how to navigate the plethora of resources.

We are also pleased to be permitted to publish two essays from a forthcoming volume, *Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach*,² by award-winning teacher **David Rhoads**. The first essay, "Hospitality in the Classroom," explores the meaning of hospitality and specific *practices* of classroom hospitality that made Rhoads' teaching legendary among many students and colleagues. "Teaching as Vocation: Some Autobiographical Reflections" is a deeply personal reflection on his own educational journey—the convictions and practices arising from being a learner committed to lifelong learning.

Douglas John Hall's commencement address this spring at Wartburg Theological Seminary is a fitting finale to this issue. Taking as a point of departure a line from one of Augustine's later sermons, Hall reflects on what it means for graduates to enter the world as people who "learn something new every day"...who speak as though we ourselves "are still knocking for understanding." He reflects on what an appreciation of *mystery* and *modesty* contributes to the life of the ministerial leader.

All of the essays in this issue are animated by the conviction that teaching is a life of *lifelong learning*, wherever teaching takes place in a church school or

2. David M. Rhoads, *Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach: Reflections on Education as Transformation through Dialogue* (working title), (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming in 2013).

seminary classroom. In the waning days of summer, we hope that the August issue will offer encouragement and inspiration for all who prepare for teaching and learning in the year ahead.

This issue of *Currents* is a bittersweet issue for the staff and, we suspect, for many readers of the journal. For almost twelve years **Craig Satterlee** has served as Editor of Preaching Helps, and since 2000 he has served with distinction as the Axel Jacob and Gerda Maria (Swanson) Carlson Professor of Homiletics at LSTC. His expertise in homiletics and his wide-ranging pastoral relationships with former students and colleagues whom he has encouraged to contribute their talents to Preaching Helps has been a deep blessing to us all. He has been a beloved teacher of preaching at LSTC. On September 22, 2013, Dr. Satterlee will take up his new responsibilities as Bishop of the North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the ELCA. We are confident that his gifts as a teacher and preacher will yield much fruit in that new call. We rejoice with him and his family, and wish him well, even as we express our sadness in saying farewell. May his teaching ministry—and the ministries of all our readers—be blessed.

Kathleen Billman and **Christine Wenderoth**

Co-editors of the August Issue

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Good Reading by the People of the Book

Christine Wenderoth

Associate Professor of Ministry, Lutheran School of Theology and McCormick Theological Seminary and Director of the JKM Library

In many respects the story of Christianity is the story of reading and writing. From the very beginning, the gospel was spread through letters and stories written down and read aloud in locations far flung from the original events, or even the stories and sermons about those events. Its spread depended on reading—whether of letters by evangelists such as Paul, or of collected stories by writers such as Luke, or by later theologians such as Augustine, Calvin, and Luther. Thus it is no surprise that the Quʾran names all non-Muslim adherents to faiths which have a revealed scripture [Jews, Christians—those of the Abrahamic tradition] as “People of the Book.”

Similarly, the Reformation can be largely characterized as a revolution premised on reading. Protestant investments in the authority of scripture and the priesthood of all believers generated the move to a widespread literacy hitherto unknown in the world. True, the church needed the printing press and then later a public school movement to spread reading to the masses. But the church made the reading practice of an elite few the practice of a majority.¹

1. I highly recommend Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). But see also: Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996); Marshall McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of*

The question is: does the church still hold this investment in reading? In this age of the Internet and other media, in this age of bi-furcated lives and “no time” is it still incumbent upon Christians to be good readers—and what does being a “good” reader [of scripture] mean?

As a librarian and academic I am unashamedly interested in reading. As a minister (“teaching elder” in Presbyterian parlance) I am particularly interested in the reading of our holy scriptures, our spiritual literature and our history as a people of faith. So if reading as such is imperiled, is the church, one People of the Book, at risk as well?

Topographic Man (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982); and Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: the Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). However, we should not limit the importance of reading to Protestantism. Note this quote from a recent *Newsweek* article: “My brother Kevin used to say that the great thing about the Catholic faith is that it’s a faith of books. There’s a sense that wisdom is earned through preparation and study, rather than owned by any one individual. In the Catholic Church, you have to read—from the Bible to encyclicals.” “The Secret Faith of Washington,” by Joshua DuBois, *Newsweek*, April 26, 2013.

Is reading in crisis?

Many teachers and pundits have claimed that the activity of reading *is* in crisis. Electronic media and frenetic, market-driven life are the identified instigators of this crisis. Andrew Abbott, in a paper titled “The Future of Knowing,” delivered to the University of Chicago Alumni Association on June 6, 2009,² contends that based on the evidence he sees as a classroom teacher, the future of human reading, writing, research, and knowledge is in jeopardy. He describes this digital age as one in which people spend “much of their time online surfing an Internet that has been optimized in terms of retail-orientated principles of web design” and in which “knowledge” has been turned into one more commodity to be bought or sold. How can one teach and learn the truth, he asks, when knowledge has been turned by the underlying workings of today’s media into a possession to be found, idiosyncratically and privately organized into discrete bits, and hoarded?

At the same time evidence is mounting that the behavioral practices, dependent neurological activity, and resulting long-term memory of online reading are quite different from that of print or text-based reading. Maryanne Wolf’s *Proust and the Squid* is the most complete report of these differences; Nicholas Carr in his bestselling book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*,³ builds his work upon hers. These observed behavioral and neurological changes all have implications for intellectual creativity and understand-

ing. It has been repeatedly suggested that we are in the midst of a transition similar to the transition from orality to literacy brought on by the invention of alphabets, writing, and the printing press. This current transition is often described in lament for the practices and capacities being lost, and about the loss of the *habitus* of contemplation. The assumption is that the old-time reading—sustained, linear, and internal—is preferable, and the new-fangled online reading is a corruption or loss.

When one examines the history of reading and literacy from the very beginnings—the move from orality to literacy, the invention of writing, the influence of the printing press in the West, and the particular history of the Protestant tradition’s roots in (biblical) literacy—this revelation quickly emerges: reading has not always been a silent, private enterprise characterized by sustained, linear, analytic movement through a text; but *well into the seventeenth century* reading was an oral, communal enterprise.⁴ Furthermore, early readers, even when reading privately, read in fits and starts, creating journals as evidence of this disjointed practice (their own writing, and quotations from others) by *decoupage*.⁵ Thus, laments over the “demise” of reading from Carr and the like are actually laments for a very time-bound, culturally specific form of literacy, not reading *per se*. We’re mourning the loss of the reading practices of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century Western world.

2. Andrew Abbott, “The Future of Knowing,” address given to the University of Chicago Alumni Association, June 6, 2009.

3. Maryann Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: the Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (Harper Perennial, 2008) and Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2011).

4. The Saenger and Manguel texts in footnote 1 make this case as does David Levy in his *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001).

5. See Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), esp. the chapter “The Mysteries of Reading.”

Descriptive work on the influence online environments are having on our reading practices and on the neurological changes associated with these emerging reading practices present a fairly consistent picture.⁶ Our abilities to focus, concentrate, and analyze—the kind of reading associated with the humanities and social sciences—are being sacrificed to the more nimble, distracted, cut-and-paste, collaborative or conversational kind of reading done online. These changes from sustained, linear, inferential reading to distracted, multi-modal, problem-solving reading are actually changing our neural wiring and thus our neurological capacities for reading and thought. Focus, attention, and progressive argument are becoming more difficult for people. But quick problem-solving, collaborative, synthetic thought is enhanced.

What isn't consistent in the newer writing on reading is the *assessment* of all these changes: some see the changes as a sign that our schools are bloated with incapable students and inept teachers/administrators/assessment, that our spiritual

lives are in decline, and that the future of knowledge is in serious trouble.⁷ Others see these same changes as the appropriate response to an inherently distracted, decentralized society: This new multi-model, problem-solving reading is equipping us with precisely the skills necessary to twenty-first century commerce and life.⁸

We live in a time when information, data, is plentiful. In fact there is too much of it available to all without mediation at a keystroke. What we lack is *attention*, the ability and circumstance which allows and encourages sustained focus on one thing for an extended time which, we traditionally think, can yield discrimination and discernment about how to evaluate and use what we find and read. Such sustained attention and focus is the condition we historically have believed is essential to deep thought and Christian education. This is why we mourn when our church folk have jobs *and* families *and* commutes which rob them of time and attention and erase the communal, congregational experience of yore. We express our lament by saying people don't have time for church, for Bible study, for Christian education, or even for reading at home.

What parishioners do well—hold multiple balls in the air simultaneously, make practical and quick decisions about the efficient expenditure of their time and resources, network with family and friends

6. See Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefied Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future (or, Don't Trust Anyone under 30)* (Tarcher, 2009); Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2011); J. Milton Colalter, "Religious Reading in Jeopardy," *ATLA Summary of Proceedings* 54 (2000): 69–71; Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Professor X, *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic* (New York: Viking, 2011); *Reading at Risk: a Survey of Literary Reading in America: Executive Summary* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment of the Arts, 2004). UWO: NF 2.2:R22/EXEC.SUM; and David L. Ulin, *The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2010).

7. See especially Abbott, Carr, Bauerlein, Ulin, and Professor X in previous footnotes.

8. See Cathy N. Davidson, *Now you See it: How the Brain Science of Attention will Transform the Way we Live, Work and Learn* (New York: Viking, 2011); Howard Rheingold, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (MIT Press, 2012); and David Weinberger, *Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge now that the Facts aren't the Facts, Experts are Everywhere and the Smartest Person in the Room is the Room* (Basic Books, 2012).

to make their complicated lives work—*these* things are precisely the skills—the skills of multi-tasking, surfing, juxtaposition and association, problem solving and collaboration—which are congruent with reading on the Net. As Terje Hillesund makes clear in his article “Digital reading spaces,” online reading involves browsing, scanning, and skimming; keyword spot-

tinuous” experience, replete with distractions, multi-tasking, collaborative and process-oriented work. Paying attention to something is by definition ignoring or being oblivious to everything else.¹⁰ Obliviousness to our shape-shifting twenty-first-century world is not necessarily a virtue, and yet the traditional “deep” reading of the print environment demands the luxury of intentional obliviousness. My point is simple: Let’s re-examine our assumptions about “deep” and “shallow” reading and at least consider the possibility that the “shallow” reading common to the online world is exactly what Christians need to do well as they minister to each other and the world in light of their understanding and interpretation, their deep reading of the texts of their tradition. Print literacy promotes analysis and contemplation; but digital literacy promotes awareness, collaboration, and decision-making. The important thing is that people are reading.

Obliviousness to our shape-shifting twenty- first-century world is not necessarily a virtue, and yet the traditional “deep” reading of the print environment demands the luxury of intentional obliviousness.

ting; comfort with malleable, moveable, borderless “texts”; and a “sustained discontinuous” experience.⁹ Sounds an awful lot like life! I contend that the real world of ministry is a similar “sustained discon-

What is “good” Christian reading?

The real question for the church, then, is what do we want reading to do for us, for the “existential, or religious dimension of our lives”?¹¹ Does the Christian life require capacities for both the online and print kinds of reading? And what role should the church play in teaching “good” Christian reading?

Let’s assume for the moment that the church still holds an investment in reading—that we are still called to read and study the word of God as found in scripture, if not the rest of the world. How, in today’s wired environment, does the church teach people to read? We can be aided here by

9. Terje Hillesund, “Digital Reading Spaces: How Expert Readers Handle Books, the Web and Electronic Paper.” *First Monday* 15, 4 (April 5, 2010). Accessed at <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2762>

10. Davidson, *Now You see It*. 2–4.

11. David M. Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001), 199.

looking at experts in the pedagogy of literacy. They tell us that literacy is a culturally embedded enterprise. It is more than the raw decoding of signs: it includes the history and manner of communicating within specific communities and specific modalities.¹² It has never been one thing for all times and all peoples. In our multicultural world brought on by globalism and our multimodal world brought on by media technology now even a three-year-old must be able to handle a myriad ways of “reading.” North American elementary and secondary classrooms are full of children speaking a variety of languages in the home (bringing into the classroom all the cultural freight they contain) *and* using a variety of media on a daily basis. Kids must be fluent readers of Spanish, Swahili, Chinese, or Arabic as well as English; fluent readers of images, sounds, and movement as well as print. They must know the conceits and cultures of these many communications. So, too, with adults!

In addition to attention to cultural context, literacy educators also urge awareness to the specific strategies required of the particular *purpose* of reading (sometimes referred to as functional literacy). What is the point of the reading? Is it to decide on a course of action to address a medical condition? Is it to understand the perspective of others? Is it to relax with a good story? Is it to discern the word of God? These goals all require their own strategies and practices.¹³ Such practices cannot be

learned and taught once and for all in grades one through three. Nor are the kinds of reading we expect in school, in the work world, in church or in the civic arena inevitable: they must be encouraged and taught. As Maryanne Wolf points out, reading is a neurologically unnatural activity. You don’t just pick it up; you have to be taught to read.¹⁴ Learning to read is a life-long process—and each of the modes, media, languages, and cultures of literacies we need must be taught and learned and re-taught and relearned.

At the same time church-goers are time and again identified as “biblically illiterate.”¹⁵ It’s not just that we don’t read and know the Bible, we don’t know *how* to read the Bible. Put all of this together, and it seems fairly plain that the church has a responsibility to teach reading, particularly reading of the Bible, in our churches. Again, reading, literacy, is more than the raw decoding of signs. Literacy is about the meaning and purpose of those signs: thus reading entails critical evaluation, inference, internalized personal knowledge,

Reading Purposes: A Descriptive Study of Twelve Good Internet Readers” in the *Journal of Literacy Research* 40 (2008): 128-162; or the articles in *The New Literacies: Multiple Perspectives on Research and Practice*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Baker (New York: Guilford Press, 2010).

14. Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*, 222.

15. This charge is not new. See James D. Smart *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: a Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). Nor has it gone away: see Rachel Miller Jacob, *With all our Strength: Reading the Bible with Heart, Mind and Soul*, a thesis for the D.Min degree (McCormick Theological Seminary, 2013). In the popular press Stephen Prothero has documented this illiteracy in his *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007).

12. Modalities is the term used to describe both the various media and the difference between print, visual, audio, etc., forms of communication.

13. See for example Jean-Francois Rouet’s *The Skills of Document Use: from Text Comprehension to Web-based Learning* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc. Publishers, 2006) or Shenglan Zhan’s “Strategies for Internet Reading with Different

memory, effort, context—in short, going beyond the text.¹⁶ Whether the values of analytical, inferential, perspective-taking *print* literacy or of nimble, multifunctional, problem-solving, decision-making *on-screen* literacy or—as I suspect—some combination of the two are needed by the church, *churches must teach reading*. That means we must continue to ask: What does it mean to be “People of the Book” (with the word “book” in quotes!)? What does reading have to do with being Christian? Can literacy *not* be at the heart of the Christian life? And therefore how should churches approach reading?

To summarize: [1] Reading has been tied to the spread and maintenance of Christianity from the very beginning, and took on ever greater importance after the Reformation. [2] Reading as it came to be practiced in the eighteenth century is changing under the very recent aegis of the online environment. [3] These recent changes in practices have resulted in changes in people’s ability to focus, pay sustained attention, and analyze texts and the thoughts these texts contain *but* have increased our abilities of multi-tasking, surfing, juxtaposition and association, problem-solving and collaboration. [4] Many scholars see in these changes a loss of knowledge, thought, and spirituality (and by implication the loss of tradition); others find in them precisely the skills needed to function in a “sustained discontinuous” world. Finally, [5] since reading is a neurologically unnatural activity anyway, schools and churches have the responsibility to teach faithful reading whether the goal is the advancement of Christian knowledge and spirituality, the appropriation of Christian tradition, or the ability to make informed faith-based decisions in a mutating, collaborative world.

16. Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*, 220, 224–225.

What can pastors and churches do to foster good reading?

We’ve now reached the “so what?” portion of this article. So if these conclusions have any validity, what do pastors and churches *do* about it? The short answer to this question is: don’t add a *class* on Christian reading! People won’t come to yet one more thing—they have no time. And remember, reading is not about decoding but attention, skill, and context. Instead, the teaching church must be aware of the need to teach reading and incorporate that into what it already is doing. Beyond that, I recommend two strategies.

First, reading ain’t what it used to be. Yes, we can and should encourage the more sustained, contemplative, traditional kinds of reading by providing such opportunities for folks. But reading has changed, is changing, and is changing us. So let’s also incorporate this new kind of reading into the life of faith. In a book titled *Net smart: how to thrive online*, Howard Rheingold recommends the literacies needed to be “net smart”:

- **Attention** or mindfulness, a self-reflective practice not unlike meditation.
- **Participation** such as blogging, tweeting, wiki contribution, organizing online, social bookmarking, curating, self-publishing, sharing—whether interest- or friendship-driven. In other words, we have to deliberately participate, not merely lurk.
- **Collaboration** examples include wikis, Firefox and other open source software, crowdsourcing, crisis mapping.
- **Critical consumption of information** aka the analytic work he colorfully calls “crap detection,” evaluating the knowledge claims and expertise or authority found on the Net.

- **Network smarts**, that is, understanding the logarithms of the Net's reach; knowing how search engines work and prioritize; being aware of the influence of social networking.

What kind of online conversations—blogs, classes, events—as part of its Christian education program could the church mount to engage and direct these kinds of literacies around specifically Christian issues and concerns? For example, how could a Christian education blog incorporate the reading of the data-gathering, problem-solving, and collaborative type, replete with browsing, skimming, malleable, moveable, borderless “texts” into an exploration of a topic of concern to the church? How could the pastor or teacher guide people into nuanced, informed online reading practices as they explore what the Bible may have to offer to a contemporary situation? Reading online need not be shallow at all, but to be good reading it must be quite sophisticated in its awareness, navigation, and assessment of its incredibly complex environment. In fact, after decades of print reading and at the front end of Net reading, online reading is more complicated than print reading, and should be acknowledged as such—and these complications should be addressed. Put another way: don't think of teaching reading or literacy as distinct from the subject content of online church communication and education. Teach (and be taught!) how to navigate, interpret, assess, and enlarge what you read on the Web.

Secondly, whenever the church engages the practice of reading in a more traditional way and venue—in a Bible study, book club, Sunday school class—teachers (whether they be pastors or not) should engage in “think aloud modeling.”¹⁷

in which they literally go through *their* reading strategies out loud with folks, monitoring how they comprehend and evaluate what they have read. Do they (you?) jump around looking for specific information; do they skim to get the “lay of the land” before reading more closely; do they go into reading aware they are approaching the text with particular biases and expectations; do they process the text in light of prior knowledge; do they mentally summarize the text into their own words and frameworks; do they reflect on the reading afterwards? In other words, teachers should make explicit and conscious to learners that which *they* (the teachers) do intuitively and unconsciously. We must not assume that people learn such reading strategies on their own. But because teaching literacies and teaching content are interconnected, we should teach both simultaneously. This is the core of the life-long learning and reading which is at the heart of Christian mission.

Underlying these two suggestions is the assumption that the *process* of reading is what creates practitioners. Practitioners have to figure out how much and how they can read within the constraints of real-world time and community. They have to figure out how their reading explorations and frameworks guide daily practices. But more than that, they need a reading, literate community within which to practice, hone, and share their own reading skills. That has been the case since biblical times, and it is the case now in the digital age. It's all about changing and being changed by the word of God—found nowadays in print, in video, in audio, online!

17. Michael Pressley and Mary Lundeborg, “An Invitation to Study: Professionals

Reading Professional-level Texts” in *Literacy Processes: Cognitive Flexibility in Learning and Teaching*, ed. by Kelly B. Cartwright (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 166–173.

Education for Ministry: A Model for Adult Formation

Cathy Cowling

Former Director of Christian Formation, Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, Philadelphia

Perhaps this scenario has a ring of familiarity. Your congregation, like many in the mainline Protestant denominations, has an average Sunday attendance of approximately one hundred worshippers and a small but dedicated children's church school. There is little, though, in the way of formal adult learning and formation beyond the liturgy other than seasonal offerings in Advent and Lent. This state of affairs is certainly not from lack of effort: you have offered Bible studies, inquirers' classes, and book groups but with disappointing and disheartening response. The unfortunate reality is that in many of our faith communities the tasks of learning and reflection have become primarily the purview of children and church professionals. Just why is it that so many Christians seem disinterested if not unwilling to study scripture or the traditions of the church? Aren't we supposed to be people of the Book?

Certainly the demands of our over-scheduled society (granted, some of which are self-imposed) often make it difficult to carve out time for one more commitment. But that is a cop-out that too easily lets us off the hook. Through conversations over years of consulting with congregations and teaching in parish settings, I have come to the conclusion that the church is often its own worst enemy. Too often we have designed classes that have offered instruction and information without engaging

the crucial process of reflection, discussing Christianity as an abstraction rather than inviting people to explore ways to integrate their life story with that of the core Christian narrative. We have too often been silent in helping people understand that doubts and questions are not antithetical to faith but are important elements in the search for truth and the nurture of faith and that conversion is a pilgrimage more than a moment in time. When frequently the loudest public voice of Christianity sounds from conservative evangelicals, we have not always distinguished the difference between biblical literacy and biblical literalism, and why the former is important. Nor have we necessarily articulated that a deep piety and rich spiritual life need not be anti-intellectual. And we have often failed to present a convincing rationale as to how, if the Bible is not inerrant, it is authoritative, especially when some people's experience of the Bible has been as an authoritarian tool to beat up others while other individuals view much of it as irrelevant to twenty-first-century culture: lovely bits about Jesus, but the rest is rather archaic. Given all this, it is not surprising that a growing portion of our society claims to be "spiritual but not religious."

Thus it is both surprising and yet not surprising at all that a four-year program of theological education by extension for lay people, *Education for Ministry (EfM)*,

developed by the School of Theology of the University of the South is so successful at adult formation. “*Four years?*” is usually the first question asked by potential students, expressed with a tone of incredulity and dread, shortly followed by, “*The group meets for three hours every week for nine months each year? There’s no way.*” (Although it must be said that participants commit to one year at a time, not the entire four years). For some, the discovery that there is also an annual fee of several hundred dollars is what finally makes them decide not to participate. Yet, despite the burdens of time and money, thousands of women and men in America and numerous other countries, from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, meet weekly in their seminar groups to pray, study, and reflect. From large, amply-resourced congregations to tiny churches to prisons, people seeking a place to explore their own beliefs in relation to the traditions of the Christian faith and to discern ways in which God calls them to ministry in the world use EfM. Developed and administered by an Episcopal seminary, EfM has become widely used not only in Episcopal and Anglican congregations but also by a growing number of churches from other denominations, with some inter-denominational groups and even inter-faith groups now in existence as well as online groups.

Three sectors of meaning

In his book, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, James W. Fowler argues that any serious approach to the Christian formation of individuals and groups must “coordinate the convergence of three sectors of meaning: (1) the dynamism and direction of their personal life narratives, (2) the web of social interchanges in time that constitute their evolving life

structures, and (3) the perspectives on the Divine praxis and purpose offered in the core story of the Christian faith.”¹ EfM seeks to accomplish this through in-depth study of the Judeo-Christian narrative, engagement in reflective activity that invites participants to explore ways they integrate their life stories with that of the Christian faith, and the discernment and practice of spiritual disciplines and ministry.

EfM consists of two primary components: study and reflection, which are sustained by the prayer and worship life of the EfM seminar group. The academic materials, which are provided by the EfM program, are divided into four years: In Year One participants study the Hebrew Scriptures and are introduced to biblical exegesis. In Year Two the focus is on the Christian New Testament, Year Three covers church history, and Year Four deals with theology and ethics. Each student is responsible for his or her own learning goals. There is time dedicated in each seminar session to discuss the content the students read in the texts, raise questions, wrestle with the issues raised in the materials, and seek clarification.

The second component is the heart of EfM: engaging in processes of theological reflection, with the goal of learning to think theologically. By examining their own beliefs in relationship to our societal culture and the Christian tradition, participants explore what it means to be effective ministers in the world—how we may manifest the love of Christ. The starting place for theological reflection can begin with any one of four sources: actions and personal experiences; personal positions and beliefs; the larger societal culture; or our faith tradition, which includes scripture, liturgies, and the historical traditions of the church. Whatever subject is chosen (and

1. James W. Fowler, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 137.

the subject can spring from a personal incident, a text, an artifact, a movie, an issue, virtually anything), the group then explores it through theological themes of creation, sin, judgment, and redemption with the intent, as my former co-mentor Melissa Buckingham says, of “going after the ongoing, ever-changing answers to the three great theological questions: Who is God? Who am I? What will I do?”²

EfM in practice

So, in practice, how does this actually work?³ In our rather stratified culture, many participants are at first taken aback when they realize their seminar group may contain multiple years. While some groups exist with all students reading the same year (for instance, this past year my group was all Year One students, reading the Hebrew Scriptures), many groups contain multiple years, with some encompassing all four years at once. Multiple year groups can certainly present a challenge for the mentor who facilitates the seminar, but the richness in diversity of subject matter as well as student experience with EfM can be rewarding. What enables multi-year groups to function are the common lessons that provide the structure out of which the group does its work together. These common lessons include members sharing their spiritual autobiographies; examining their personal theologies; exploring the relationship between theology, worship, and ethics; developing a spiritual life; exploring ministry; and of course, reflecting theologically. In the new curriculum, the

common lessons will be incorporated into four volumes of a Reading and Reflection Guide, thus ensuring that participants never repeat a common lesson over the course of four years. Regardless of what academic material students may be reading, the entire seminar group engages with the common lesson portion of the seminar session.

The seminar session, which is generally two and a half to three hours in duration (I confess, I’ve been an EfM mentor for many years and rarely finish in less than three hours) begins with worship or some form of devotion, the design and leadership of which is usually shared in turn by all members of the group. This is followed by a brief time for check-in, crucial for the development of trust and community. The bulk of the seminar time is then divided between the common lesson, which most often is a form of theological reflection, and discussion of the academic materials. Allowing time for closing worship and a refreshment break (after all, food is an important component of communal life), the common lesson and discussion of the academic readings each take roughly an hour or so, the common lesson frequently requiring slightly more time. This pattern is repeated weekly throughout the nine-month academic calendar. That said, though, groups have considerable freedom to develop their own rituals of communal life.

As an example, imagine an EfM group that contains Year One, Year Three, and Year Four students. At the beginning of the academic year, the members of the group share their spiritual autobiographies as one of the common lessons: looking back, where have they perceived the movement of God in their lives? What have been some of the significant turning points in their spiritual journey? Besides helping to build community, this task helps clarify

2. Melissa credits her own EfM mentor, Elizabeth Biles, with the three theological questions.

3. EfM is currently in the process of a major change in its printed materials. While the new curriculum materials will be introduced in September 2013, much of the structure and process will remain the same.

and bring to the forefront the personal narratives of each member as part of the formation process. The flow of the seminar for this group at their fifth or sixth week would include opening worship and check-in, followed by several members sharing their spiritual autobiographies. For the second half of the seminar time, students would then discuss the academic material they had read. For Year One students, this is likely to be a chapter on the Cain and Able story, as they make their way through Genesis, further exploring the theological perspective of the J source material. Year Three students would be studying the issues of the Early Church as it struggled to define itself in a climate of persecution, utilizing the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian to articulate a doctrine of the church amid schism. The Year Four students would be delving into the revolution in philosophy that emerged from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment and the challenges this posed to Christianity. The session would end with a time of prayer or closing devotion.

At nearly their twentieth session in the year, this same group might do a theological reflection for its common lesson or have an exercise around the topic of our life in Christ, exploring ascetical theology and ways they may be called to respond to the world around them. The second portion of the seminar session would again be focused on the academic material each year is reading. At this point in the year, the Year One students are likely to be studying the book of Joshua and the conquest of Canaan, with an introduction to the theological perspective of the Deuteronomist. Year Three students are grappling with mediaeval scholasticism and the implications of Aristotelian thought for theology. The Year Four students are exploring existentialism, with an introduc-

tion to the thought of Bultmann.⁴

Obviously single year groups are more easily managed when it comes to discussion of the academic material. Many multi-year groups will divide into small groups by year for the discussion of their weekly academic reading assignments; this allows for much greater depth of discussion

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especially with such diversity in content. Other groups prefer to remain together and hear what their fellow students are studying, choosing to find a common theological thread that enables all years to participate in discussion. Using the second example of the seminar session near their twentieth session, this group might use their various readings as a springboard to discuss how faith communities cope with significant changes to their rituals or belief

4. The fourth year material on theology and ethics will be changing fairly significantly with the new curriculum.

systems, drawing from the various years' lessons to inform the conversation. A skilled mentor will always help participants make connections between the content of their studies and the present day context of their lives, faith communities, and wider culture, always circling back to the primary theological questions named above by Buckingham and the convergence of meaning identified by Fowler.

The role of the mentor in EfM is crucial. As the teaching role is built into the materials, the mentor serves as a guide and facilitator for the seminar group as well as the administrator and a participant. Prior experience as an EfM student is not required to be a mentor. A mature faith, familiarity with methods of biblical scholarship and experience in serious religious study, a willingness not only to live with ambiguity within the faith tradition but also the ability to foster an environment to explore questions of faith, and group development and facilitation skills are primary criteria for the selection of EfM mentors.

Mentors are required to be trained and accredited by the School of Theology: training sessions are offered numerous times throughout the year in various parts of the country. Training requires eighteen contact hours, usually spread over three days; and mentors must be reaccredited every twelve to eighteen months. The first time training serves both to introduce potential mentors to EfM and the process of theological reflection as well as discern whether potential mentors have the skill and desire to be effective mentors. Once certified, mentors return again within twelve to eighteen months for another training session, again with a primary focus on developing skills for theological reflection. For active, experienced mentors, formation training sessions are offered, allowing mentors to focus on particular

areas or skills such as spirituality, vocation, worship, living with conflict, group design skills, etc. After completing three cycles of formation training, mentors are required to return to the basic training to brush up on reflection skills. The almost annual training requirement for reaccreditation not only hones mentors' skills and keeps them current in changes to the EfM program, but it also grounds them in a learning community, modeling the values and learning approach that is foundational to EfM.

Insights for the task of developing formation processes

EfM is certainly a rich, rewarding, complex, and rigorous formation process that, honestly, is not well suited to everyone. However, whether you are interested in using EfM for adult formation and education or not, its model offers important insight and guidance when developing formation processes and programs. The first is that it takes place in the context of a small group (EfM seminar groups contain no fewer than six and no more than twelve students and a mentor). While parish forums, presentations, and traditional classes certainly have their place in the educational life of the church, the small learning community is essential for the process of formation, reflection, and prayer, as well as instruction.

My experience is that most people yearn for community, a place of trust, friendship, and connectedness to both one another and to the holy. Members of a small learning community, especially one that meets over an extended period of time, not only intellectually discuss ideas but also share and explore their own stories in search of meaning. Indeed, everyone in the group is both teacher and learner. This model of learning is grounded in

the theological perspectives that God has gifted the community with all we need and that as the body of Christ, we are not complete if the gifts and presence of all are not called forth and recognized. It acknowledges that discernment is a task that we must undertake in communal listening through prayer and testing. It embraces the notion that learning is lifelong: we never cease from exploration, as T.S. Eliot points out.

Imperative to the success of a small learning community is that it be grounded in values of openness, acceptance, and safety. While it is certainly true that some people would simply prefer to be told the answers, many who attend church, perhaps especially those either returning to or coming to Christianity for the first time as adults, are skeptical and full of questions. What makes the seminar group work is the creation of a safe environment where members have the freedom, without judgment, to explore their lives of faith, including the doubts and perspectives that differ from the church's party line.

- EfM has helped me lose some of the fear of exploring my faith.
- I can even name my heresies!
- In some way, I think I was in need of open, frank conversation about the spooky parts of faith. To know that doubt is okay and common to all through the centuries allows me to recognize that I didn't just miss that gene.
- What EfM did was give me an intimate place to explore doubts and questions with a group of people committed to the long haul. My faith wasn't changed in any dramatic way but was given a home.⁵

5. These quotations are from former EfM students who graciously responded to a series of questions I sent them, asking for their reflections on their experience of EfM

Exploring the doubts and questions, which often have multiple, changing, or no answers at all, is necessary to ways of being in faith and open to the movement of God in our lives. When we focus solely on imparting the "right" information that we expect students to grasp, then we have failed at the task of formation. As Marianne Micks reminds us, "A faith unventilated by doubt is as stuffy as a closed room."⁶

We do a disservice to our fellow pilgrims by shying away from the complexities of the faith story and the theological issues it raises. Too often we have shallow expectations for serious study of the scriptures and faith traditions, perhaps even fearing that somehow, too much knowledge will damage or erode a person's faith. More than forty years ago, James Smart, in his book *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, bemoaned the reluctance of the clergy to introduce the tools of exegesis and hermeneutics to the laity; sadly that is still the case in many churches.⁷ However, what EfM has discovered over the years is that when students apply source, textual, and historical criticism to scripture and are introduced to and become familiar with the theological concepts of metaphor and myth, the Bible becomes more relevant to their faith than if the text were taken simply at face value.⁸ I will never forget the student who, when she reached the chapters on the historical Jesus, asked if this was taught in seminary. When told yes, she became incensed that she never

and their faith journeys.

6. Marianne H. Micks, (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International and Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 4.

7. James D. Smart, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970).

8. Diana Butler Bass also speaks to this in her book (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006), 185f.

heard about it from the pulpit! “Why was this kept a secret? It would have made things so much easier for me if I had heard a minister talk about this!” Serious engagement with the biblical text and its multi-dimensional theological perspectives can help participants encounter an authoritative voice that is authentic and relevant to their faith journeys, often to their surprise.

Not that this approach to the study of the Judeo-Christian tradition isn’t without challenges. As with any other sector of church life, participants in EfM are at various stages in their faith development, each with different needs and perspectives.⁹ Some more than others struggle with how to process, reinterpret, and integrate the new information and perspectives they encounter. This struggle, though, has the potential of leading to a transition to another stage of faith development, which Fowler describes as “significant alterations in the structures of one’s knowing and valuing and, therefore, in the basic orientation and responses of the self.”¹⁰

As a former student of mine, reflecting on her EfM experience, said, “My faith has been shaken, built up, demolished, and renovated. In other words, faith is a living part of my experience—not just for Sundays and sacraments.” A question of any formation process needs to be: In what ways does this invite and aid us to

deepen their relationship with God and our fellow creatures?

This leads to my final observation about EfM and any serious process of formation: it invites us to contemplate what is the value of an informed faith and to what purpose. Our Baptismal Covenant calls us all to ministry: to continue the reconciling work of Jesus, to partner with God in bringing about God’s purposes, to proclaim by word and deed the good news of God in Christ. Neither this call to ministry nor its incarnation belongs solely to the clergy; it is intended for the *laos*, the whole people of God. An embrace of this vocation requires education and development, to know the story of God and God’s people in the world, and it requires that process of conversion, that pilgrimage by which we bring our stories into harmony with the greater faith narrative through the ongoing cycle of prayer, work, and reflection. It is that vocation for which we pray that God will send us out to do the work God has given us to do, loving and serving as faithful witnesses of Christ Jesus.

For more information about Education for Ministry, please visit the website at www.sewanee.edu/EFM/index.htm or contact EfM through the School of Theology, The University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn.

9. For a description of the various stages of faith formation, see Chapter 3 of Fowler.

10. *Ibid.*, 58.

Reading the Bible with Children and Youth

Elizabeth F. Caldwell

Harold Blake Walker Professor of Pastoral Theology, McCormick Theological Seminary

Consider the questions you have heard from parents or those questions raised by children:

- There are so many Bible story books for kids, which one do I choose?
- Yep, I have a Bible at home, got it for confirmation, don't really know where and how to begin to read it or understand it. That's why I bring my child to church.
- We give Bibles to second graders, what should we give?
- Why is there so much violence in the Bible?
- Doesn't the Bible contradict itself?
- Jesus healed so many people. Does he heal people today?
- What stories do we make accessible to children at what age?
- What do you do when the Bible is wrong? Do you change the view of God that is presented?

Is the issue reading the Bible with children, or is it also helping parents learn how to read the Bible with their children and to listen to their questions? Before offering some practical suggestions and resources on this topic, it's important to be familiar with some of those who are thinking and writing about the larger topic of growth in the life of the Christian faith.

Christian formation

In an article in the *Journal of Family and Community Ministries*, Yust, Csinos, McLauren, and Jennings write about the spiritual formation of children in the emerging church movement. They agree that the spiritual formation of children happens when congregations invite them into worship and every place where they can participate in experiences of being God's faithful disciples (i.e., learning through socialization). Yet they also value the importance of catechesis which John Westerhoff has defined as a primary function of helping "the faithful individually and corporately meet the twofold responsibilities which faith asks of them: communion with God and communion with one's fellow human beings; that is, to nurture that intimacy of spiritual life which expresses itself in social justice, liberation, and the political struggle for whole community, peace and the well-being of all persons."¹

These religious leaders also believe that children learn about the faith by participating with other persons of faith who "model the life in which they want their children to be formed."² The second way

1. John H. Westerhoff, "A Call to Catechesis," *The Living Light* 14 (3, 1977), 356–357.

2. David Csinos, Karen-Marie Yust, Brian McLauren and Daniel L. Jennings,

that catechesis happens is when there is a context in which children can

come to understand that God's story intersects with and informs their own stories. Catechetical models must place a priority not only on the words and actions of Jesus, but also on Christian narratives and the ways in which children find their places within them. All human beings live by narratives; for example, many people in today's world live by the story of consumerism, which says "you are what you own." Christian narratives are culturally specific ways in which God's people interpret and enter into individual faith stories in terms of overarching and enduring theological themes.³

These authors are suggesting that the narratives we teach and live with our children make a difference in how they are formed as Christians. Most churches would say that catechesis as defined by Westerhoff is what they are doing or hope they are doing with their children and youth. But which narratives of the Christian faith are taught and when are they taught and what interpretive skills do we both model and teach with our children and youth?

A reality of the life of many parents today is that many are not comfortable or at home with finding their way into the Bible, nor do they possess the language to engage in the conversation of Christian narratives and the life of faith, or at least they don't think they do. "Reading the Bible, which can open a person to the depths of the mysteries of God and faith, is a scary thought to those who believe

that experts should tell them how to read and what to think."⁴ Many have grown up in Christian homes, were even confirmed as teenagers, but believe that pastors and educators (the experts) are better at forming their children in faith.

This assumption and ensuing practices has led to a generation of youth who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, or none (none of the above). In the language of the National Study of Youth and Religion, these youth practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), having faith in a God who is only involved in their life when they need help and believing that the main goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.⁵

Kenda Creasy Dean contrasts a "diner theology" of youth with a "consequential faith." A consequential faith is "far more likely to take root in the rich relational soil of families, congregations and mentor relationships where young people can see what faithful lives look like, and encounter the people who love them enacting a larger story of divine care and hope."⁶ I agree with Kenda Creasy Dean that religious identity and the ability to live in the world as Christian doesn't just happen because children have been in church school for twelve years or spent one or two years in confirmation education. A "consequential faith" is possible when kids grow up with people

4. Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), 5.

5. For more information on MTD see Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

6. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

"Where Are the Children? Keeping Sight of Young Disciples in the Emerging Church Movement," *Journal of Children and Community Ministries* (2010), 15.

3. Ibid.

who model the life of the Christian faith for them. When children and youth are raised with the abilities to wrestle with biblical text, then they are developing the tools required of a “consequential faith.”

In a recent article, “Sticky Faith: What Keeps Kids Connected to Church?” Jen Bradbury suggests that

cracking open a Bible and wrestling with its content must become part of a youth ministry’s DNA...In Scripture, teens discover that Jesus’ message is neither fire and brimstone nor the string of never-ending niceties that they expect. By examining Jesus’ relationship with his disciples, they realize he wants more than their happiness and demands more than their half-hearted allegiance. He wants their very lives, something that appeals greatly to a generation looking for a leader worth following and a cause worth committing their lives to.⁷

Bradbury goes on to suggest that having five adults invest in the life of a youth during his or her teenage years makes a difference in his or her continuing presence in the life of a congregation after high school.

So five adults who model the life of the Christian faith in their words, their actions; five adults who are transparent about their own questions of faith; five adults who can affirm that even with questions or doubts, they still have faith in God; five adults who are willing to wrestle with questions about the Bible; five adults who are willing to talk about their community of faith and the way it surrounds, supports, and challenges their faith—so simple yet so challenging.

Guidelines for reading the Bible with children and youth

So what are the implications of all of this for reading the Bible with children? In a recent article in *The Christian Century*, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson introduced her critique of children’s Bibles.

The simple fact is that the Bible is not a book fit for children, neither in its unsavory parts—murders, rapes, genocides, betrayals, mauling by wild animals, curses, divine retribution and apocalyptic horrors—nor in many of its neutral or even uplifting parts, including statutes and ordinances, proverbs, genealogies, geographies, prophecies, censuses and pretty much all of the epistles. It’s no surprise that most of these sections get dropped from children’s versions altogether, though at some point we may begin to wonder with what justification they still call themselves Bibles. Scripture is definitely something to ease the little ones into, not drop them in cold. So what’s the best way to go about it?⁸

In contrast to Wilson’s questions about how to help children read and understand some of the more difficult and challenging biblical texts, Melanie Dennis Unrau raises the question of feminists, “Where are the girls in the children’s Bibles?” In her review and critique of children’s Bible story books, she uses five criteria—“the five P’s of a feminist picture Bible”—pronouns, people of color, critique of power, women who speak or act, and pictures to evaluate them as either unredeemable, not much

7. Jen Bradbury, “Sticky Faith: What Keeps Kids Connected to Church?” *The Christian Century*, 130, No. 11 (May 29, 2013), 23.

8. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “R-rated: How to Read the Bible with Children” in *The Christian Century*, 130, No. 5 (February 25, 2013), 22.

better, salvageable and recommendable.⁹

Both of these authors then reviewed and critiqued a small selection of children's Bibles. I was surprised both by some of the choices they made and by what books were not included in their list. Using the approach of Wilson and some of the criteria of Unrau, I would like to recommend the following Bibles and Bible story books that I think are excellent choices both for children and parents and other family members who want to read the Bible with children so that this practice is embedded in their life of growing in the Christian faith.

Easing children into the Bible

Beginning with young children:

The *International Children's Story Bible* by Mary Hollingsworth (Thomas Nelson, 1993) has selected 105 stories that represent some diversity in the kinds of writing found in the Bible: history, wisdom literature, Gospels, and letters. Stories are chosen for their accessibility to younger children. Each story is one page with an accompanying illustration drawn by a child. In the letter to parents at the beginning, the publisher reminds the reader of "God's love for every person, regardless of race, nationality or culture. Yet, we often portray God's Word to our children through illustrations of people who look just like ourselves."¹⁰

Children of God, Storybook Bible by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2010), shares a similar commitment to helping children begin to read the Bible from a multicultural perspective. The fifty-six stories are chosen

to show the ways that God works through history and how God wants all people to love each other. In their commitment to designing a global children's Bible, the stories are illustrated by artists from around the world. Each story is on two pages and ends with a prayer. The Deluxe edition includes a CD with Tutu reading the stories.

Young reader:

Ralph Milton first published *The Family Story Bible* in 1997 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) which includes an excellent selection of favorite stories of women and men in a contemporary storytelling format including many illustrations. Then he expanded this work into three volumes, *The Lectionary Story Bible*, Year A, B, and C (Woodlake Books). These volumes support those congregations that follow the appointed lectionary texts for Sundays in worship and or in church school. One or two of the four lectionary texts are the focus with a style of storytelling that invites children into the text with their own questions. All three volumes use inclusive language for God. The illustrations of Margaret Kyle invite the reader or hearer into the story, thus making this book accessible to non-readers. Included at the beginning is a word for adults who are using this story Bible with children. Two statements provide insight into biblical interpretation and methodology behind this story book. Milton writes,

The Bible is not a book of rules or a set of moral precepts that we somehow absorb and then order our lives by, although some contemporary churches encourage this view. Traditional Christianity says that when we're open to the "word of God." God will speak to us *through* the Bible. So I'm asking you

9. Melanie Dennis Unrau, "Where are the Girls in Children's Bibles?" In *geez*, (Spring, 2013), 43.

10. Mary Hollingsworth, *International Children's Story Bible*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

to approach the Bible with a kind of childlike openness.¹¹

This introduction provides a place of beginning for parents to consider their own assumptions about the Bible. Milton invites adults who want to read the Bible with children to remember that God still speaks to us through the Bible, and the Bible will never be boring.

Elementary age children (eight to twelve years):

Deep Blue Kid's Bible (Common English Bible, 2012) is a children's version of the newest Bible to be translated, *The Common English Bible*. Three children, Asia, Edgar and Kat act as guides to help children dive into the Bible. In addition to an introduction to each book of the Bible, there are in-text notes that help children understand and begin to connect with difficult and challenging biblical texts. Other features include maps, Bible exploration tools and facts, challenges for reading and remembering and ways to connect text and life. All of these resources are written for children ages eight to twelve. Because the *Common English Bible* was written for an eighth grade reading level or lower, the translation is very accessible for this age-group of readers. Also available is an app, *Deep Blue Kid's Bible*, which includes many of the features in the print version as well as twenty-one puzzles from stories in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. For more information, visit the website: www.deepbluekidsbible.com.

The Children's Illustrated Bible (DK Publishing, 2005) with stories by Selina Hastings and illustrations by Eric Thomas combines several biblical resources into one volume. It includes: an introduc-

tion to the Bible; overviews of particular time periods such as the Patriarchs, Life in Egypt, Daily Life in Jesus' Time, and the Early Church; maps and a listing of people named in the stories. Each story also includes side bar information that provides historic and cultural information. The kind of information that adults have to find with a concordance, Bible dictionary or atlas are included here in a condensed version for children. The only drawback of this version is that the biblical quotes are from the King James Version. For the curious reader who wants more background about biblical stories, this is a great resource.

Bible story books that are resources for learning at home and at church:

In addition to the books described above, there are several books that are excellent choices to have available in church school settings or on the pastor's or educator's shelf for use in worship with children.

The Pilgrim Book of Bible Stories (Pilgrim Press, 2003) takes a very creative approach to the selection of stories that are told. The book is divided into nineteen chapters and includes stories from the laws of Leviticus, wisdom literature and prophecy, kinds of writings that are usually not included in children's Bibles. Each chapter includes an introduction "that reveals the developing thread of the story, linking history to interpretation, literature to life. This approach roots the stories in the historical reality of their times."¹² The other unique feature of this Bible story book is the artwork which was drawn by Diana Shimon, an Israeli artist who created her illustrations in Israel.

JPS Illustrated Children's Bible (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2009) has stories retold by Ellen Frankel. In

11. Ralph Milton, *Lectionary Story Bible, Year A*, (Kelowna, BC, Canada: Wood Lake Publishing, 2007), 8.

12. *The Pilgrim Book of Bible Stories*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 5.

writing about her choices of the fifty-three stories that are included here, Frankel says, “my stories were guided mainly by my sense of what makes a good story for children, but a few were included because they are pivotal to an understanding of the Jewish national story.”¹³ The illustrations by award-winning artist Avi Katz invite the reader into the drama and feelings of the stories. At the end of the book there is a concluding section, “Writing a Jewish Children’s Bible: An Author’s Notebook.” Here the author provides the background for her selection. “My chief aim in writing this book has been to introduce American children to the language and rhythms of the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁴ Katz has adapted the stories from the 1985 JPS [Jewish Publication Society] translation. In this section she writes about how she wrestled with “objectionable or adult material” and why she included the binding of Isaac and the story of David and Bathsheba but not the rape of Dinah. She includes a section on gender and reminds the reader of the cultural context in which the Bible was written and yet “we cannot simply sweep aside the contradictions between the Bible’s world and our own.”¹⁵ One way she chooses to address the issue of language for God is to use gender-neutral language.

Bible story books by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso should be included in every church library. Sasso takes favorite Bible stories for children and retells them in a midrash style, both filling in gaps in the story and at the same time, inviting the hearer or reader to connect the story with their lives. Titles include: *In God’s Name; But God Remembered: Stories of Women*

from Creation to the Promised Land; God’s Paintbrush; God In Between; Prayer for the Earth: The Story of Naamah, Noah’s Wife; God Said Amen; Cain and Abel, Finding the Fruits of Peace; Adam and Eve’s First Sunset; God’s New Day; For Heaven’s Sake.

The challenge of reading the Bible with children and youth is that we have to be comfortable with the questions they ask of the text. We have to be willing to say, “I don’t know” or “Let’s look that up together” or “What a great question, let’s think about that together.” Before we give a copy of *The Family Story Bible* to a child at her or his baptism or give the *Deep Blue Kid’s Bible* to second graders, perhaps we should engage parents and other interested family members in some sessions together about what they will hear and read in the Bible. They need as much easing into the Bible as do their children.

Ralph Milton provides a wonderful reminder for all us of how to read the Bible with children. “So enjoy each story, whether you think it is historically true, pure fiction, or somewhere in between. The inner truth, the wisdom, lives *inside* the story. Don’t look for some pious little moral, but be open to a flash of insight into what it means to be spiritual human beings who live in families and communities with other spiritual human beings.”¹⁶

Surely that is our hope and expectation in making the Bible both available and accessible to the youngest ones in our midst, that in hearing stories of God’s people a long time ago, in reading poetry, in seeing the people that Jesus welcomed, we learn together what it means to live in this world. As the prophet Micah reminds us, all that God requires of us is “to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.”¹⁷

13. Ellen Frankel, *JPS Illustrated Children’s Bible*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), xiii.

14. Ibid, 227.

15. Ibid, 233.

16. Milton, 9.

17. Micah 6:8, *Common English Bible*.

Hospitality in the Classroom¹

David M. Rhoads

Professor of New Testament, Emeritus, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

I learned a teacher's hospitality from the best-loved teacher at Carthage College, Dudley Riggle. Dudley is one of the finest human beings I have known. He has a profound theology of grace, and everything he does is informed by it. He is a quiet, unassuming person who thinks carefully through everything he says and does. He was the chaplain at the college, and he preached some of the best sermons I have ever heard. I have this enduring feeling about his sermons that they persuaded you because they met every objection that you might have had in the course of listening. As I listened to his sermons, some reservation on my part would arise in my mind. And just as I was formulating it, Dudley would then say, "You might be thinking..." And he hit the nail on the head every time. As such, his sermons were profoundly dialogical in very pastoral ways by anticipating your responses and addressing them. By the end of the sermon you were right with him—experiencing some new-found freedom or ready to love others in a richer way or prepared to share as never before.

Dudley carried the same forethought into the classroom by anticipating how students might feel and then putting them at ease. That forethought is one of the best

exercises I know for good teaching. Put yourself in the place of the student, and try to imagine their experience in your classroom. Imagine what it is like walking in the first day, looking around for a safe place to sit, getting yourself oriented to what this class will be and who will be in it, and what will be expected. Dudley imagined all that and sought to anticipate the students' concerns at every step of every class! This was not easy in light of the subjects he taught. His most popular class was "Issues in Living and Dying." This class required enormous sensitivity on his part, because people brought with them so many personal experiences of death and grief and so many fears of what lay before them. Many students were in the midst of tragic situations even as they were taking the class. The capacity to anticipate the student experiences of the class were crucial for this course. Dudley was always up to the task.

While I was at Carthage College, I consulted with many of the faculty about their philosophy and practice of teaching. When I asked Dudley, here is what he said. "Much of my approach to teaching has to do with hospitality. I arrive ten minutes early and greet my student guests at the door. This enables me to ask how they are doing and to relate to each one personally. When they enter the room, they will see on the chalkboard the list of things I plan to do during that class period. This way, there will not be any guesses for them about how the class will proceed. I start the class on time, make announcements,

1. This essay is taken from a forthcoming volume, *Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach: Reflections on Education as Transformation through Dialogue* (working title), by David M. Rhoads (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, later in 2013). *Currents* is delighted to offer our readers a "sneak preview."

proceed to do what I write on the board, and end the class on time. This seems to be a way of being respectful of the students. I learn their names at the beginning of the course and call them by name when they have questions or comments. I get their papers back on time. I see all these matters as issues of hospitality—making them comfortable in the classroom and taking them seriously.” “I find,” Dudley concluded, “that if I take them seriously as students, they will take themselves seriously and do their best work.”

This image of “hospitality” and the insights that have followed from it have informed so much of what I have tried to do in the classroom. The idea of being a host has led me to develop many new aspects of my relationship with students. It has also made me realize that hospitality is not something added on to the learning experience, like seasoning to a meal. Rather it is an important ingredient of the recipe itself for good learning.

Hospitality as sacred trust, sacrament, and solidarity

At its simplest level, the image of hospitality relates to our homes. If I imagine the classroom to be my home, how would I act if I had guests? Actually, hospitality is a lost art in our society. Where I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania in the 1950s, people who came to the door were invited in, workers were offered a drink and a snack, door-to-door salesmen were listened to politely. Now we are reluctant to let anyone into our homes at all. Or we call out threateningly from inside the door: “Who is it?” There may be a difference to hospitality when we have taken the initiative to invite guests to our homes. My wife is a wonderful person to welcome people. She sees hospitality as sacramental. From the time she begins preparing for their arrival until after they

leave, her attention is wholly devoted to our friends and the experience they are having at our house—the orderliness of the house, the welcome, the food, the attention to meaningful conversation, the goodbyes. Absolutely none of this has anything to do with making an impression. It has everything to do with being natural and making people feel at home. She has her mind off of herself and onto our guests. To her, hospitality is a sacred art designed to give the guest—friend, acquaintance, or stranger—the most meaningful and welcoming experience we can offer. Similarly, I want my students to feel at ease, to be glad they came.

In ancient Israel, hospitality was a sacred trust whereby Israel cared for and protected the strangers and aliens in their midst. Hospitality is not just for “people like us,” but for people different from ourselves. There was a solidarity with the guest that required their needs be met and that they be treated with kindness. Israelites would offer a great deal and risk a great deal to treat their guests well. Israelites were told to recall that, at one time, they too had been strangers in Egypt and that they should learn from their experience. So too, we teachers were students once. Can we imagine back to what it was like for us? Can we not treat those student-strangers who have been entrusted to us with kindness and thoughtfulness?

Hospitality was also central to the early Christian movement. Proclaimers and healers went from place to place depending on the hospitality of strangers. It was a means of solidarity, a sign of those with whom you have made a covenant of peace and protection. To give and to receive hospitality was to gain “brothers” and “sisters.” In fact, some New Testament writers portrayed hospitality as a metaphor for all Christian relationships. Paul writes the admonition to “Welcome

one another.” This places hospitality as a holy act that imitates the way God has welcomed us, as Paul so aptly adds: “just as Christ has welcomed you.” Can we as hosts in the classroom not commit ourselves to give such unconditional hospitality to those who come under our pedagogical roof?

I do not know if Dudley thought about such ideas as he modeled hospitality in the classroom, but I suspect that he did. In any case, I have tried to learn from him and to improvise my own version of such welcoming hospitality. How could I make students feel welcome? How could I make them feel at ease? How could I create an atmosphere where people were free to speak and learn without being anxious or fearful? How could I provide an experience that made them glad they came to class on any given day? How could I provide the kind of hospitality that would facilitate for them the most meaningful classroom experience? These are questions that have occupied me in my teaching vocation.

Classroom hospitality in practice

First, like Dudley, I try to arrive before the students do. Often I will come early in order to arrange the chairs and tables in the room to my satisfaction. I will get my papers out and ready for teaching. Then I just walk among the students as they arrive, greeting them, talking with them and asking how they are doing. On the first day of class, I will shake hands with them as they enter the classroom. I will often thank them for signing up for the class and tell them I look forward to being together with them. I, as a teacher, am genuinely grateful that they are there, and I want them to know that. Lately, I have taken to welcoming students with a greeting and handshake before every class.

If on a first day I have not met them

before, I will learn something about them—where they are from or what program they are in. After the class has been going for some weeks, I may use this time to ask someone how they are feeling (if they have been sick) or how their family is

From the beginning of the course, I assume that my relationship with individual students will last through the semester and beyond. I would welcome people to my home in this way. Why not to the classroom?

(if I am aware that they have had a crisis). Sometimes I will be able to take a student aside at this time before class and forewarn them confidentially that they did not do so well on a paper I am about to return to them and inviting them to talk with me about it later if they would like. I also linger after each class as a means to make myself available. From the beginning of the course, I assume that my relationship with individual students will last through the semester and beyond. I would welcome people to my home in this way. Why not to the classroom?

Second, I try to begin on time and end on time. This seems to me to be a matter of basic respect. If some students are late, I do not wait for them. This would penalize students who come on time, and it would teach people that if they come late they will not miss anything. At the same time, I am glad to see students even when they arrive late—and often there are very good reasons why people are late. I just start on time without making a point of it. Many of the students have made great sacrifices to be in school. And some have traveled a good distance on that day to be there. So I feel that I owe it to the students to fill all the class time with good learning experiences.

And I try to end on time. Despite my best efforts, I sometimes find in myself an urge to just keep on making that important point at the end of class, even if it means the students must stay a few minutes longer. But this is not respectful. Besides, at this point, they are giving signals by putting away notebooks and zipping up backpacks. So what are they learning? I used to wait until the last few minutes of the class period to go over the assignment for the next class. Invariably, there was not time to explain it well and not time to field questions for clarification. So I would go past the end of the class. Now, I give the assignment for the next class period at the beginning of the class or midway through after a break. This way I can be sure that the assignment is clear, that the students have had time to ask questions about it, and that I will not go past the ending time of the class. Going beyond the end of class is fundamentally a matter of taking myself and my subject *too* seriously. There is seldom anything so important that it cannot be interrupted or wait until the next time. Otherwise, it is just a matter of poor planning on my part that is thoughtless and inconsiderate.

Third, as an expression of hospitality, I get to know their names. I need to be very intentional about learning student names, but it seems well worth the effort. Right after registration, before the class begins, I request the class list and I begin to memorize it. If there is a photo directory, I correlate the names with the pictures and practice them. Then when I arrive at the first class period, I already know the names, and I can begin to correlate the names and photos with real people. I repeat their names in my mind as I meet them. I usually find some reason to have them talk in pairs during the first class; and while they are talking with each other, I will take the list and practice the names in my head. Even with a class of thirty-five or forty, I can usually name all of them personally without the list before the first class period is over. Of course, I quickly forget! But I practice before the next class; and I try to recall their names when I see them outside of class. By the second or third class, I can address everyone by name. Even at Carthage College, where there was no directory and forty-five students in a class, the effort to know their names was quite workable and paid dividends in establishing the personal nature of learning in the classroom.

This learning of names on my part is helped also by the fact that I lead students through a process that will enable them to know each other's names as well. Knowledge is power, and if the teacher is the only one who has a class list, then students are placed at a decided disadvantage. If they were guests in my home, I would spend a considerable amount of time introducing the guests to each other. So, all students get a class list with the names of all the students. Often, in the first class, I will spend time letting each student introduce herself or himself to the class with a comment of some kind on their part. Then I

will stop every few minutes and see if the students could recall the names of the last six or so students who have introduced themselves—without at first consulting their class list. This gives a chance for them to practice the names. I have the students work briefly in pairs to try and recall the names, so that, as paired partners, they will begin to get to know at least one other person well.

The business of students knowing each other's names is crucial for generating an ethos of learning in the class. I expect the students to work together in the course—both inside and outside of class time—and to learn from each other. They will meet throughout the class in pairs and triads and small groups. I say to them: "This semester, you will spend thirty hours together. It would be a good idea if you knew each other's names!" Thirty hours is only for the quarter system. In a semester system, the number of hours is forty or more. People will be together a lot. The point is that the classroom provides a wonderful opportunity to build community. Learning should be a social event. People should come to class to be with their friends and to talk with them about things that matter to them. So the class is a chance to get to know people better and to make new friends. I make sure they get in small groups with different people on a regular basis in each three-hour class period, so they can learn from new voices. I have often had students say on their evaluations of a class: "I learned as much from other students as I learned from the teacher." Learning the names in the first class period is a message—that the relationships among the students matter and that they will be learning partners.

Another thing I do as a matter of hospitality is to communicate with students between classes. Of course when I see them outside of class, I greet them,

and I often ask how the class is going for them. But I also email them. I confess that I have done very little to incorporate technology into the classroom or to use the Internet site provided by our seminary to foster communication with and among students. I believe everyone would be well-served by that process; and many of my colleagues use it to great benefit. Nevertheless, what I have managed to do is to prepare a distribution list on my computer of all the students in each class. I will send an email to them before the course begins, welcoming them and saying how much I look forward to the class. Then after each of the weekly classes, I will send an e-mail message telling them how much I appreciated the class, their enthusiastic participation, some conversation that was especially meaningful, or something else that I genuinely enjoyed about the last class. I usually also include a copy of the assignments for the next class as a reminder and as an anticipation of some things we might be doing then. I do this a day or two after most classes. The message is brief and takes little time to share. But it makes clear to the students my own experience of the class and the fact that I am thinking about them beyond the scheduled time. I realize that for some students this is just one more email to open. But for others students, the brief message is an important connection with me, with the class, and with the subject matter. And occasionally I get a response back posing a question or telling me how much the class meant to *them*.

Dudley Riggle identified another feature of hospitality as the act of putting on the chalkboard the outline for the day's class period so that people could see what was happening and be prepared for it—a sort of syllabus for each day. I never did so well with tight schedules for an individual class period, partly because I am not that

well-organized and partly because I think of my classes as workshops and therefore I may change the class plan as I go! Only recently did I come to appreciate fully the importance of what Dudley was doing, especially in relation to the syllabus for the whole course. For years, I had given to students only the barest outline of a syllabus, with a list of class dates and the overall subjects to be dealt with. I tended to give the assignments class-period-by-class-period. I distributed handouts to be used during the class as the course went along and the handouts for the next assignment. *I myself* knew what I was planning to do, but unfortunately the *students* did not know what would happen next until they got the assignments.

Then, some years ago, there was an illness in my family that led me to change my practice. My wife got cancer and endured a three-year siege of it before she got a stem cell transplant that saved her life and restored her health. Also, my wife and I were raising two grandchildren. In addition, we lived ninety miles from LSTC. I came in to the seminary on Sunday evening, stayed at an apartment on campus through the week, and then went home for the weekend on Thursday or Friday. During my wife's illness, however, the seminary helped me work out an arrangement whereby I was able to work at home more days of the week. Even so, I could not be sure I would be able to arrive ahead of any given class to photocopy the handouts. Nor could I be sure I would not need, on any given day, to turn the class over to one of the many colleagues who so graciously volunteered to substitute for me when I could not be there. So I spent the summer developing the entire syllabus for whole semester—class dates and subjects to be covered, assignments for each class in complete detail, every handout for every class, and directions for writing papers.

I gave the whole thing out the first class period, almost ninety pages!

I was astounded by what a difference it made. It made an extraordinary difference for me. I did not ever have to rush around to get handouts copied and ready. I did not have to formulate the assignments. I could concentrate on planning the class period itself, developing the subject matter, and preparing my spirit for interaction with the students. And what a difference it made for the students. All their handouts and assignments were organized in one place. They could plan ahead for assignments and papers. They could consult ahead on just what would be involved in the writing of the papers and the basis upon which they would be evaluated. I have always believed that students already have enough reasons built into the classroom experience to be anxious. They do not need reasons for *unnecessary* anxiety due to a lack of information or due to the inability to plan ahead. So, part of the hospitality I show now is to give them all the information they need about the course so as to alleviate any unnecessary apprehensions. Then they can focus better on the learning itself. I know many teachers have done this as a no-brainer from the beginning of their career. I am just glad I eventually learned it. It's never too late!

Along with this process of letting people know ahead of time what to expect in the course comes the importance of giving timely feedback to the students' work. First, there is feedback in class for daily assignments. When students do an assignment for class and then do not have a chance to discuss it or deal with it in class, this is discouraging. Why prepare for class when the assignment is not relevant to what happens in the class for which they have prepared? So I try always to have the students discuss or do a cooperative exercise with their preparations for *that*

class. Then there are the assignments they turn in for grading or credit. Here, I try to return their work on the next class period. For some students, there is a psychological block to moving on to the next material for class until they know how well or how poorly they may have done in previous work. So I am committed (even though I sometimes do not succeed), even when there are written exams or papers due, to give back papers with many comments in the very next class period. And, it is clear to the students that I have indeed read their work, because I tend to give extensive reflections and evaluation of it. It seems to be a matter of hospitality to take students seriously by taking their work seriously.

Finally, food is an important aspect of hospitality. Sharing food and drink is the greatest form of community building. Obviously, students cannot share meals together, unless the class agrees to go to a local restaurant before or after class. But much can be done to share food. I have not done this well, but I know faculty who bring snacks each class period. Sometimes a student will bring brownies or cookies they have baked. It creates a festive atmosphere to learning and takes seriously the fact that students will need a break and some sustenance to get through a three-hour seminar—or whatever length it may be. One colleague begins the course by inviting students to take turns bringing snacks for the class. She sets up a calendar of dates for the class, and students sign up. Each week the students can look forward to sharing these goodies at break time. Such a practice increases the social relationships

among members of the class. Instead of scattering at break time to find coffee machines or student lounges, they stay in the vicinity and talk with each other. Besides, such an arrangement also makes it easier to reconvene the class so as to begin on time again after the break. We should never underestimate the extent to which students appreciate someone bringing nourishment to help them enjoy the class time.

What is the point of all this? All of these elements of hospitality are integral ingredients to good learning. They not only create a safe space for learning; they *comprise* a safe space for learning. They contribute to an *ethos* of trust and openness. They generate an atmosphere where students and what they say will be received in a hospitable way—honored and engaged constructively. They enable honest and meaningful conversations to take place. They foster learning that can involve challenge and growth. They create community where, at any given time, all can be teachers and learners. In the end, hospitality does not have to do with a series of activities or pedagogical strategies or contextual mechanics. Rather, hospitality has to do with relationships. There can be no productive dialogue without good relationships.

There are other aspects of hospitality that Dudley Riggle did as means to take seriously the work of the students. Everyone has to find their own meaningful ways to do it. And when hospitality becomes a natural and integral part of the classroom experience, the results are well worth the effort.

Teaching as Vocation: Autobiographical Reflections¹

David M. Rhoads

Professor of New Testament, Emeritus, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

In the course of finalizing a book of reflections on teaching and learning, I had a dream that was illuminating for me. I have been retired for several years now. And I have not done any teaching during that time. In my dream, I had been invited to go somewhere to give an informal talk or lecture in a lounge at some unidentified seminary institution. I was pleased to be doing it. However, I was worried that too few people would show up, concerned that it might not be worthwhile for the school to have invited me. But I was reassured as I walked down the hall when I saw about thirty or so people moving into the lounge area, some I recognized from seminary. And I thought this to myself: “I am going to enjoy this. When I taught before is when I experienced ecstasy.” Then I woke up.

Actually, ecstasy is a word that does indeed make some sense when I think about my experiences as a teacher. I am not talking about ecstatic experiences where one seems to be outside oneself with incredible joy and the thrill of life. That kind of ecstatic experience would overwhelm me as a teacher (not that I do not relish them when they happen); and, frankly, it would overwhelm students and stifle the learning

process with an ocean of emotion. Rather, I am talking about a quiet ecstasy that relishes the interaction among the participants in the learning process in experiences of meaningful dialogue, mutual questing, insight, laughter, and transformation. I have had moments in which I would stop and become deeply aware of my joy, and I would spontaneously say to the class, “You know, I would not sooner to be anywhere else, with any other people, doing any other thing, at any other time, than I am with you, right here, right now.”

Maybe ecstasy is not quite the right word. After all, the word does literally mean to “stand outside” oneself. By contrast, what I am speaking about is a matter of being fully within oneself. It is embodiment in and as myself in relation to who and what is around me—being wholly present in that time and place. It is being embodied in relation to all the other embodied persons in the room as well as the material surroundings and the cultural ethos.

Maybe the best way to explain it is with the concept of “flow.” A University of Chicago researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, studied sports figures regarding those optimal occasions when there is an incredible synchronicity between the archer and the bow and the arrow, the target, and the entire context in which the event occurs.²

1. This essay is taken from a forthcoming volume, *Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach: Reflections on Education as Transformation through Dialogue* (working title), by David M. Rhoads (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, later in 2013). *Currents* is delighted to offer our readers a “sneak preview.”

2. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

Most sports people talk about it as being “in the zone” or being “unconscious,” when everything seems to flow in an incredibly natural, creative, flawless, and almost unself-conscious way. It is critical to note that one is “in the zone” only occasionally. After years of persistent practice and play, there come times when it seems as if the body is perfectly attuned to perform at a level not usually experienced and with the greatest of ease. One cannot conjure up these moments. They just happen.

I think the same can be true for teaching. You spend many class periods when you are living and open to have such flow. You read widely, prepare class plans, give lectures, facilitate discussions, give feedback on papers, grade exams, and advise students. And all of it is a kind of low-level flow, wherein there is deep satisfaction for what is happening. Then there are those intermittent times when it all seems to come together in a concatenation of interactions in which you are inseparable from the seamless web of what is taking place, and everyone seems to be caught up in a zone of the human spirit that transcends the ordinary. In these moments, each of us seems capable of saying and doing unexpected things we had not experienced before. And they seem to be just the right things to say and do in that moment.

Although I don’t “work” for those moments, I nevertheless look for those moments. As I said, they cannot be contrived or manipulated or forced. One can only seek to create the conditions for them to happen. And when they come, I am on high alert, eager to keep the interaction at this level for as long as possible. Sometimes I will begin to share on a subject in a way that transcends my normal conversation in class, and I try to bring the class along with me into it. Sometimes a student will say something that seems to reach down to

a deeper level of sharing that potentially goes plunging into the subject at a different level or that seems to go beyond the subject at hand to some matter of human significance. I can think of a few specific words practically blurred out by students:

- “Why won’t anyone take my illness seriously as a marginalized social location?”
- “This book we read has led me to dramatically change political perspective. I am not the same person I was last week.”
- “Wait, stop, you’re presenting way too many challenging ideas for this class to handle at one time.”
- “I feel emasculated by this conversation about the liberation of women. Why do I have to be put down to raise others up?”
- “That was a racist comment you (another student) made; take it back.”
- “I’m a Christian and I know what I believe, I don’t care what the Gospel of Mark says.”

These comments have the potential to dive down deep with the whole class and stay there awhile. There is a lot to unpack and the issues matter to the students. Often the comments shock the whole class into a new level of attentiveness—in which something special can happen.

Immediately, when something like this happens, I linger and seek to maintain that depth as long as possible. I may try to name the significance of the comment for the rest of the class. I may invite the speaker to say more or invite others in the class to share what they are thinking and feeling. Then I listen very carefully. In these moments, silence and openness are often my best allies. I am acutely alert to the dynamics of the whole class, even though I will usually let the class go on its own for a quite a while. I try to bring everyone into the zone of interaction. At these times, I need to know “when to

hold 'em and when to fold 'em," when to speak and when to listen, and what to say so that everyone stays in that space and everyone's words are honored.

You anticipate these times. And when they happen and when the issues are addressed and everyone grows from it, even when there is frustration and conflict and contention, then the heart sings and the "communion" of the moment flows. Biblical language distinguishes between

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students.

two different experiences of time. *Chronos* time is the linear experience of time in hours, days, weeks, and so on. By contrast, *kairos* time is "opportune time" or "occasion time." Perhaps it is best captured by the well-known verse declaring that "For everything there is a season...a time to plant and a time to pluck up...a time to weep and a time to dance...." When class is going normally, I consider myself to be on linear *syllabus* time, moving along with the subjects and methods that need to be dealt with. However, when one of these special moments presents itself, I imme-

diately think of myself as being on *kairos* time, "opportune time"—a time that comes when it comes and we have to be open to it. Then chronological time stops. I am no longer worried about the material I have to cover that day or where we are on the schedule. My demeanor changes and I am in a different time zone. In that moment, my one goal is to dive down with the student, take the class along with us, and see how long we can stay at that depth—by listening, sharing at the same level, and engaging each other in things that matter in some fundamental way. Then, I need to be prepared to resurface in a way that does not lose the profundity or the magic of the moment.

I may simply be describing, to a greater or lesser degree, what everyone experiences who has a sense of vocation in their work—of being called to something, of doing what it seems as if one was created to be doing. There is a feeling of exhilaration that you are doing it. Some people say about their job or career: "I cannot believe that someone is paying me to do what I love to do." That is certainly part of it.

And I say this because I do not believe any of this can happen without love. Teaching and learning require meaningful dialogue. You cannot have dialogue without trust. And you cannot have trust without love. So I love my students. In my latter years of teaching, I often prepared for class by preparing my spirit for the time with students in a class. I use my class list to pray for them individually before class time. I pray for their whole persons and life quite apart from the classroom. I pray that they may have a vocation of learning to match and complement the vocation of teaching. I pray that I may foster learning that leads to transformation, yet at the same time that they may be liberated from my influence so that they can be free

to learn and think for themselves. I pray that I will love them for their own sake and not for what they can do to make me look like a good teacher. I pray that the class period may be sacred time and sacred space. And I tell my classes, not often, but often enough, especially after I have spent a number of meaningful hours with them over the course of a term, "I love you all" or, as I am dismissing the class, simply "Love you."

These experiences of teaching are moments of meaning and fulfillment for me, not because they are my private experiences of quiet ecstasy but because the students themselves are participating in them. They are experiencing what I have found meaningful. I think it likely that most teachers at some level are seeking to replicate for their students the joy of learning that they themselves had as students. We recall those times when there was a teacher who "turned us on" to learning, a startling insight that left us with wonder and delight, the satisfaction of writing an outstanding paper and being recognized for it, a course we took in which our fascination just could not be satisfied and we found ourselves lost in the library or online digging for more, or a place where we experienced transformation. To let you know how some of those experiences happened for me, I want to take the liberty of sharing some of my educational background.

My educational journey

Early years. I have been blessed with wonderful educational experiences in my life. To a person, my elementary, middle, and high school teachers in the small western Pennsylvania town of Hollidaysburg were conscientious and cared about us. I recall one typifying moment in which I went to a ninth grade history teacher, saying that I was afraid I might be having a nervous

breakdown—going to school, doing homework, working twenty-five hours a week in a barber shop as an apprentice, being in the school band, and practicing for a school play at night. What Miss Ruck said to me (words I clearly recall) was unbelievably liberating and healing: "For the next few weeks, I want you to sit in the back of the room and look at TIME magazines. You are excused from any assignments for the time being. Do not feel any pressure from me. You can do this. You are making the highest grade in the class and you can stand to ease up. Just get to feeling better." And I did what she said. And I got over my anxiety. I cannot tell you how often I have thought of the grace of that moment and sought to pass it forward to students of mine who found themselves in stress or distress. My later years as pastor of a congregation for three years in Asheboro, North Carolina, further instilled in me this recognition that students have lives larger than my experience with them in the classroom and at the same time deepened in me a sense of compassionate concern for each student in my care—whether they passed my class or not.

I went to Gettysburg College, an excellent liberal arts college and I was offered an outstanding education. I did not always make the most of it and I did not always do so well, but it was there for the taking. I started out as a history major. I did not do well learning facts and piecing together the dynamics of so many historical periods (Ironically my dissertation revised as my first book was a historical study!). So I changed to become a philosophy major. Studying philosophy was a critical experience in my life because it created in me a profound crisis of faith. I was the child of a pastor. As a youth, I had been very active in church and regional youth groups. I planned to be a Lutheran pastor, like my

father. But that was not the only reason why I was religious. When I was fifteen I had a powerful mystical experience of the presence of God that transformed my life and flooded me with love. While I told no one about this experience until years later, the relationship with God that this experience generated quietly fed my inner life and an intense love for others over many years. Then, when I was a senior in college and studying philosophy, I realized that the entire way in which I had conceived my religious experience and imagined the reality of God was simply untenable. When the framework for my religious experience crumbled, so did my relationship with a god, my peace, and, frankly, the strength of my love. I felt empty and desolate.

Oxford: a turning point. After college, I went to England to study at Oxford. There I not only had the intellectual experience of the absence of God; in addition, I had a profound existential experience of that absence—of there being no god, an empty sky, no meaning in the universe, no inherent meaning whatsoever in life. In its own way, this experience of disintegration was just as profound as my earlier mystical experience of integration. I came to believe that meaning, any meaning, would have to be created by us. I was not agnostic, as if I were unsure; rather, I was an atheist by belief and life experience. Needless to say, I struggled with this death or non-existence of God for many years. When you are in such an honest quest, you never know what the outcome will be. And you do not know if you will ever again recover faith or encounter God. However, I had given the study of philosophy a chance in college, so why not give the study of religion a chance in seminary. And, indeed, it was my study of the Bible at Oxford that enabled me slowly, bit by bit, to come back to faith—or rather, I should say, go forward and find some new and richer

experiences of God. It was an ongoing, indeed intermittent experience of God that became integral to my quest and that permitted me to be free to doubt, free to know uncertainty as part of faith, free to embrace ambiguity amid a relationship with God that was ever changing, dissolving, re-emerging, and growing. I became comfortable with doubt and disbelief, and even loss of faith, as an integral part of the journey—to doubt my *formulations* of God so that I might leave space for the *reality* of God hopefully to emerge and surprise me in new ways.

Now, when I teach, I have never, ever set out to create a crisis of faith for my students so as to replicate my loss and recovery of faith. Nevertheless, the material we study in the Bible and the conversations we have in class often lead students into a crisis of some dimension of their faith. The gift from my own experience is that I am wholly comfortable with such crises. I am not afraid for students in their struggles. And I can often provide some guidance that enables them not to be afraid, but also not to back off or withdraw or abort their quest for the meaning of life in a way that would stop the work of God in their lives—even in their disbelief.

But even more than this, I learned from my experience the most valuable lesson—that learning can be transformative, that education is not just a matter of *adding on* knowledge or skills or methods to what they already knew, although it can be that. Rather, learning can be intensely personal and life-changing. I am not talking about conversion. I never preached in college classes and did not seek to lead anyone to be Christian. Nor am I speaking of psychological therapy. That has no place in the classroom. Rather, I see learning (and teaching) as a process of challenge and growth, in which the human spirit is engaged in a process of change and move-

ment, without knowing what direction it might take or what outcome it might have.

I invite students to engage with their learning, to entertain ideas, to embrace possibilities, to imagine new worlds, to experience the lives of people different from themselves, to let their beliefs and values be challenged, to be open to change and difference. I think that this is just good education with most any subject—from anthropology to political science to ecology. One of the most depressing moments of my teaching career was when a student at Carthage said to me, “I don’t think anyone is going to change in college. By this age everyone’s mind is made up about things.” I was not so much discouraged in my role as teacher as I was sad for her and others like her who just shut their minds to the adventure of being human.

My role as a teacher was not to decide how the student should be changed or transformed or how they should come out at the end. That was not up to me. Besides, that is a mystery out of my control and beyond my purview. Carthage was a liberal arts college devoted to the quest for truth. Truth and reality are larger than my narrow compass. Students have lives very different from mine. My role is to make the learning as meaningful as I can and to give space and opportunity for engagement—with the subject matter, the values they consider, the authors they read, the other students, guest speakers, me as teacher and person, and their own history. They may not change a whit. Or they may change in some small way over an issue they encounter. Or they may experience a dramatic personal upheaval. They may end up affirming who and what they were to start with, but they will still be different for having gone through the process of challenge and discovery.

All of this sounds very dramatic, a great exaggeration. And, truth be told,

my classes are mostly quite mundane and ordinary. But the ingredients for change are there, the ethos for transformation is present, and I am always trying in a variety of ways to light the flame in a spontaneous combustion that will possibly bring some illumination. Obviously, transformation is not the only thing going on in a classroom, for example, when I am reviewing Greek verb tenses or giving a timeline for the growth of the early church or recounting the details of the Roman-Jewish War. Nevertheless, even these can be ingredients that lead to something more significant. And when we are performing biblical stories or trying to understand the rhetorical impact of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians or mulling over the blind hypocrisy addressed in the Sermon on the Mount, the possibilities for transformation are lurking at the edges seeking to break open at the center of things as we ponder the human condition. Also, truth be told, I myself am looking for transformation in every classroom event. This is why I limit my lecture time, because I want to maximize the possibility that I might be awakened by what a student may say, where the conversation might lead, and what some interaction might draw out of me that I did not even know was there. As I say, I organize my teaching so that there is no chance I will be bored!

Experiences at Oxford helped to form the deep convictions about teaching and learning just expressed. At Gettysburg College, I had not yet awakened to an “academic” vocation. And I was a great procrastinator who put off papers and study to the last minute, because learning was not yet my drug of choice, so to speak. The school offered excellent courses from outstanding faculty, but the flame had not been lit. That all changed when I went to Oxford for an MA in Theology, a degree that focused on the Old and New

Testaments and the first five centuries of church history (at Oxford, anything after that time period was too recent to assess!). I went there almost by a fluke when a religion teacher at Gettysburg, Harold Dunkelburger, off-handedly suggested I go there, because he had been on sabbatical at Oxford the previous year and knew American students who went there. So I applied. To my great surprise, I was accepted. And so I went.

It was at Oxford that an insatiable appetite for learning was awakened in me. The educational system was so different. There were three eight-week terms with two six week breaks in between, plus the summer. During the terms, you went to

major figures in the degree fields). These essays were not graded and did not count as a class. There was nothing in the two-year program that counted toward the degree except for the two weeks of exams at the very end of the two years! Talk about pressure! At that time, a student took six exams of three hours each (I had eight exams, because I also took a minor in philosophy) all in a row, one right after the other, morning and afternoon, for five straight days (Sunday off). Each exam was comprised of six to eight essay questions (prepared by faculty other than those you had worked with), and the student was instructed at the top of the list of essay subjects to “Attempt Two or Three Questions”—not very promising. Each day, I donned my short black robe, put a fresh rose in my lapel, and went off to the exam rooms with countless others in order to struggle through these ordeals. I got “seconds” on my exams, not outstanding (as “firsts” would be), but respectable. Mainly, I passed without having a nervous breakdown, a not uncommon phenomenon in those last weeks.

But the key was that I did not want to stop learning. What hooked me? It was this. Everything was based on self-motivation and self-discipline. There were no assignments that were graded. No lectures that you would be tested on. No courses to take. If you learned, it had to come from within you. As I look back on American college education now, it seems almost like it could be an assembly-line education for some: students have certain courses to take for their program (required and set up by the school); they chose from a list of courses offered each semester (determined by the faculty); and they follow the syllabus of class times, readings, assignments, tests, papers, and extra-credit (set up by the teachers). They work through their program and get a de-

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lectures throughout the colleges of the university. However, there were no assignments or tests connected with them, nor any grades. No one kept track of your attendance. We had one essay to prepare each week to read aloud to a tutor in an hour-long session (two tutors with whom we alternated weeks, both of whom were

gree. Unless a student is highly motivated, the structure of the educational program itself does not empower students easily to take responsibility for their own learning. It is tempting for students to think of learning as taking the tests in order to pass the courses and getting through the courses in order to complete the program. I know that there are ways to transcend these obstacles, particularly in one's choice of major, so as to take full responsibility for one's learning. I expect that many, if not most, of my fellow students at Gettysburg did just that. But I did so only to a limited extent.

Oxford, on the other hand, enabled the love of learning to well up within me. Week after week, I was on my own preparing an essay for a tutorial. I wanted to do well, and I did what I needed to do to give it the best shot. It took a long time for me to catch the bug. Each week, I was challenged to do better, to figure out how to read and interpret and write. I depended less and less on secondary materials, so that I could decipher the puzzles of the text for myself. One story to illustrate this process: In assigning my first tutorial, Dr. Caird gave us eight subjects to choose from. I chose "The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus." So, I went to the library and, lo and behold, I found a brand new volume by Norman Perrin entitled, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*. I was elated. During that week, I studied that book hard and gave a thorough review of it. At the tutorial, I read my essay aloud to the tutor and one other student (present, I think, to make sure my shame was public!). I thought I had done a creditable job. But then George Caird responded. After a long pause, he said, "Mr. Rhoads, (pause) the assignment was not on Norman Perrin's book on the Kingdom of God, (pause) it was on the kingdom of God *in the teaching of Jesus*."

At which point, he slowly opened toward me the Greek text of the New Testament he was holding on his lap and added, "Now, where do we begin?" In some sense, that question was the beginning of my vocation as a learner.

And so I began, one tutorial essay after another, with little encouragement or affirmation. Finally, after nearly twenty tutorials and no praise at all, I did an essay on the concept of "the son of man" in Ezekiel. I used no secondary sources. I must have read Ezekiel twenty-five times in order to come up with the diverse ways Ezekiel uses the "son of man" in various contexts. And I had fun doing it. When I finished reading aloud my analysis in the tutorial, Dr. Caird seemed somewhat surprised and said, "That's not bad for a first attempt." This was the first compliment I had received all year! And it was enough. I was beginning to get the idea that I could approach a text and learn something interesting on my own—if we have a set of questions and fascination enough to stay with it. Over the two years at Oxford, I came to have confidence that I could come up with something original on the texts I was studying. So, later, when I went to the secondary sources, I would find things that I had already come up with on my own and, often, based on my own work with the text, I would disagree and know why. I was hooked.

During that year, I had considerably enlarged my appetite for study. I did some traveling during one six-week break. Yet I became so motivated to learn that I remained on campus for one entire six-week vacation period writing a paper on "Language and God" for a prize (which I did not get). In the second and final year, I spent the last two terms and the spring break non-stop preparing for exams—imagining questions, reading, taking notes, memorizing outlines, for one subject

after another. By the time I left Oxford, I knew I wanted to teach—because it was the best way I could keep on learning!

Gettysburg Seminary/Duke University. When I returned to the states to take a final year of seminary at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, I was turned on to everything. And I loved independent studies. I had gained the confidence that I could do some measure of fresh and creative thinking with almost any text. I had an inquisitive drive, and I had enough questions and steps to take to explore in lively ways. With such a taste for learning, each course I took was an adventure. Then, when I got to Duke University for my PhD, I took every class and wrote every paper in discovery mode. After I took a break from academia for three years in order to serve as pastor in a parish nearby in Asheboro, North Carolina, I came back to Duke to do my dissertation. I worked in a carrel in the bowels of the divinity school library. I did my dissertation on the political history of Israel according to Josephus. My process? I spent the entire first year studying only the primary sources before I even ventured to see what other scholars might be saying about the subject. Every morning I could not wait to get there and begin the day's search. It was one of the happiest times of my life.

Learning by teaching: a lifelong process

When at the end of my program I had been hired by telephone interview, sight unseen, to teach at Carthage College, I arrived quite green as a teacher. As I have said, in graduate schools, they do not offer courses on how to teach. They assume that if you know the subject matter well, you will be able to convey it adequately to others. Not so! Even though I had been teaching assistant at Duke University for

Roland Murphy in Old Testament and Moody Smith in New Testament, I felt like I was on my own and I would have to make things up as I went along. As might be expected, my initial efforts to teach were quite awkward, actually rather ludicrous. And, yes, I was trying to pass forward my experience as a learner. Here I was trying to replicate with a group of eighteen-year-olds in a required course on the New Testament my experience of self-motivated discovery. In the very first class, I got the thirty-two people in the class into a circle and began to see if I could reproduce my one-on-one experience with a tutor at Oxford. I recall the particular room and just where I was sitting. And I vividly remember thinking to myself, "Now, how am I going to do this?" Oh my! That turned out to be the question I asked pretty much every day of my thirty-seven year career. The answers usually came from students. They were usually different. And they usually surprised me.

The point is that every teacher wants students to have the experience of discovery that motivated them. It is a noble desire, and has led to the birth of many students into learning, because it is the cutting edge of a person's teaching—the place where they themselves love learning the most and where their love is contagious. Ultimately, however, it is self-centered, because we cannot usually reproduce the conditions of our own learning. The students we teach are at different levels, they have different interests, and they are a different generation. Besides, people learn differently. So in the end, we have to find the wisdom of our students that will enable them to discover the love of learning without putting them into our mold.

Whatever, from the first day, I was hooked on the challenges of teaching—which meshed well with my personal

addiction to learning and my passion for the New Testament. From my religious perspective over the years, I have come to see the quiet ecstasy, the experience of flow in relation to others, and the depth of vocation, as the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. It does not sound very glorified, but I see my vocation as an exercise of the combined gifts of teaching, administration, and discernment. By “administration” as a gift of the Spirit, I mean the capacity to organize a classroom so as provide conditions for the activity of the Spirit, so that it is given space and is not stifled. By “discernment” as a gift of the Spirit, I mean there is some intuition about what to do, when to do it, and how to do it so as to respond to student learning in a way that generates those *kairos* moments of transformation that make learning an adventure. And I seek to foster and model the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control. Not possible and never done adequately, but worth striving after. I have never explicitly shared these thoughts with students, but they run deep in what I do.

Thoughts about the Spirit led me to a larger question that connects what we do in the classroom to what is happening in the world. The governing question became: “What is the Spirit of God doing in the world and how does this classroom participate in that activity?” When I first began to teach, I just wanted to be the best teacher I could be. Then, I had an epiphany one day in the middle of a class when I asked myself: “Why am I doing this?” I had been working hard to be the best, most effective teacher I could be. But now I was asking: “Best, most effective teacher *for what*? What am I doing in doing what I am doing?” What were the human values I was seeking to foster? What vision of the world was I hoping to nurture? How could I model the freedom

of learning that I valued so highly and also model the care for others, the attention to the vulnerable, the capacity for selflessness, the facility for cooperation, the love of justice and peace, the desire to be good citizens of the country and the world, and the responsibility to tend the Earth? So often, we simply do what we want to do and then ask God to bless it, rather than asking what God is doing and seeking to be agents of that work. Now I was asking the latter question. In this process, I found that my career vocation became wedded to my basic and more encompassing human vocation.

From that point on, my teaching was less about me and how well *I* was doing as a teacher. It’s about the students, duh. This insight became clearer to me as I went along. When my wife was sick with cancer, we met some doctors who arrogantly sought the kind of treatment for her that served their research agenda and not Sandy’s well-being. Then we met a doctor who said to her at the first visit, “I have no ego in this. I just want you to get the best treatment for your circumstance.” At which point, he referred her to another hospital for a stem cell transplant, which was the beginning of her recovery. Teaching is like that. It is about the students, what *they* are learning, how *they* are learning, and how *they* are being prepared for citizenship in the human community. And I struggle to “have no ego in this.”

When I had the epiphany about what I was teaching *for*, that was the moment when I also realized that all learning is political—not in terms of political parties and political ambitions but in terms of the social order. I had recognized that all learning was personal as we seek transformation in encounters with the subject matter. Now, I also saw how irrelevant so much of our learning is if it is not connected to the issues we

face in the world and the realities we face as humans. In other words, the *content* of the learning as well as the *process* of the learning has to be part of addressing our world and of participating in the creation of alternative worlds—a classroom that not only engages that world as it is but that also empowers us to imagine and create the world in new ways.

This is what keeps the world of academia from becoming an ivory tower and keeps what we say and do there from being only “academic” or irrelevant and without power. It is partly that the courses seek to show how student learning is related to practical activities and responsibilities in life. But surely that is not in the end what makes a class relevant. Rather, what makes it relevant is the connection to and engagement with the issues we face in the twenty-first century. To do this is to think of the classroom as a laboratory for life. This is the only teaching approach that is viable in the world today.

Now at one level, all of this as a description of my classrooms is kind of malarkey. I doubt if my students would even recognize that I was doing any of this or that they would see these ruminations as reflective of what they actually experienced in my classes. In one sense, I have been depicting my ideal and my desire, not what has actually happened. But this disparity between my desires for the classroom and the reality was another problem, namely, that I had to learn not to be disheartened by my lack of success.

In this regard, at about the same time as I had this insight about why I teach, I also had another realization—that I should not make my motivation and energy depend on the student responses I desired. After three years of teaching first-year students in required courses in New Testament, I was becoming somewhat frustrated and resent-

ful that the students were not responding with the enthusiasm and dedication I had hoped. I was taking their attitudes and the level of their efforts personally. I was in danger of expressing my frustration as a means to motivate them to respond in a certain way to make me look good or feel good about myself as a teacher. It meant that their motivation might be even further eroded or, worse yet, done out of guilt or due to a need to please me or so as not to see me disappointed. That couldn't be good.

At the time, I happened to be reading *Franny and Zooey*, a story by J. D. Salinger. In the novel set in the '40s, the oldest brother, Seymour, was part of a family of brilliant children who did a radio show, “It's a Wise Child,” in which they entertained radio audiences by answering questions posed to them. Seymour's name (“see more”) reflected his wisdom. His younger brothers on the show were mystified that Seymour always shined his shoes before every show, despite the fact that this was radio (so no one would see his shined shoes) and, in any case, their feet did not show behind the skirt placed around the table where they sat (so that not even people in the studio would see his shoes). The brothers later recalled (after Seymour died by suicide) that Seymour had said he did it “for the fat lady”—a listener he imagined as a poor woman in a rural area with little education sitting on her porch in the heat listening to this “Wise Kids” program while she swatted flies away from her face. In other words, he was doing it for folks who could give him no accolades and could bring him no prestige. He was doing it because it was what he did for its own sake and because it might be entertaining for others simply because they were human—an expression of who he was and not because of what he could get out of it or how people would respond.

After reading this book, I saw the correlation between this story and my need to use my students to make me look like a successful teacher. So, as means to help myself get over any need to have the students respond a certain way, I shined my shoes regularly for the rest of the year! I did it just to remind myself that I was doing this teaching out of my vocation and out of grace. I can only do what I do and seek to learn and improve from it. The rest is not up to me. And if I try to manipulate, I ruin the whole experience of the love of learning—for them and for me. So I have sought to “detach myself from the fruits of my labor,” so that my value and effort as a teacher is not determined by how students may or may not respond. Of course, it is relevant but not determinative of my well-being or commitment. As my predecessor at Carthage was want to say: “You can sow the seeds, but you can’t guarantee the harvest.” So, let it be. In some sense, then, the spirituality of teaching is the capacity to relinquish control of the outcome. As a student, Sarah Roemer, wrote in one of the evaluations at LSTC, “Teaching is a dying to self in the trust that the Spirit will work in the dialogue of the community of learners.” Indeed!

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts to free them, students will sometimes treat me as if I am taking their failures personally, by apologizing to me for a bad grade they made or by telling me how they let me down with poor effort. Now, since I

had liberated students from the grip of my egoistic need for them to be a certain way, I always say, “You are free to do what you do. You do not owe me anything as a teacher. Your life is your own. You will succeed at some things and fail at others. You will give greater or lesser effort for a whole variety of reasons. There is more to your life than this class. You may struggle with these things, but, in the midst of that, you certainly don’t need to add on the burden of needing to satisfy me.”

Having said all this, I want to add that if teaching is my vocation, then the student vocation is learning. Often students think that learning is simply preparation for a vocation they will pursue after they graduate. Indeed, part of my vocation is to provide the best preparation I can give to them for that future. Yet when they have this approach, they think of their vocation as something that will happen only later, when they get a job. They think of the classroom as a penultimate experience rather than also as an ultimate experience in itself. This is a kind of deferred satisfaction. In the meantime, I try to inculcate in students a love of the experience of learning that gives them a sense of vocation—*now, as a student*—so that they take responsibility for their learning, that they enjoy learning for its own sake, and that they cultivate learning as a part of the human vocation they will pursue throughout their lives. That part of my educational experience, I do indeed hope they will emulate!

Commencement Address

Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa – May 19, 2013

Douglas John Hall

Professor of Theology, Emeritus, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Bishop Wickstrom, Bishop Justman, President Olson, Distinguished Colleagues, Co-Graduands, Members and Friends of the Wartburg Seminary Community:

It is a great pleasure to be with you today, and I am truly honored to be numbered among the graduates of this seminary. My first visit to Wartburg Seminary occurred nearly thirty-five years ago—in October, 1979. At that time, I had published only one or two larger books, so I augmented my brief biographical statement (which I sent to the seminary in advance) by naming some of my well-known teachers. I had had the privilege of studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York for seven years in the 1950s, and, as some of you will know, Union at that time was unique on this continent for its remarkable galaxy of Christian educational luminaries in every field.

I have never forgotten the lovely manner in which I was introduced to the gathering that night by a wise older professor whose name, alas, I have forgotten. He simply read out the names of my professors—Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, John Coleman Bennett, Paul Scherer, James Muilenburg, Wilhelm Pauck, and others—and then he took a deep breath and exclaimed, “Well! If, with teachers like that, a guy can’t make *something* of himself, what hope is there?”

That was decades ago. Now, quite sud-

denly (it seems to me) I find I’ve become an old man! Whether, in the meantime, I’ve “made something of myself,” I leave to heaven. My present preoccupation is to endeavor to explore the blessings of old age (there are some, by the way). To that end, I have been reading biographies of other old men and women, especially the great composers of the Western cultural tradition, music having been my first love. Recently, in a wonderful biography of the famous Russian composer and pianist, Sergei Rachmaninoff, for instance, I read the following statement from a letter written in his later years:

I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old ways of composing, and I cannot acquire the new....¹

Yes (I thought), I know that feeling—especially when I consider the awful “technologization” of everything today, including music! It’s true: at 85 one can sometimes feel something of an alien in this wired world.

But the “old man quotation” I want to share with you today contains a quite different message. It is a message about

1. Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 351–352.

being a theologian, a teacher or preacher, or simply a serious Christian in a world growing ever more one-dimensional, economically and environmentally unstable, and bellicose. The quotation comes from a source with whom, I am sure, you are all familiar—Augustine of Hippo. In Henry Chadwick's splendid little posthumous biography of him, this brief sentence from one of the old Augustine's sermons was quoted:

We, who preach and write books...write while we [ourselves] are still seeking. We learn something new every day. We write at the same time as we explore. We speak as we [ourselves] are still knocking for understanding...²

I should like you to reflect with me very briefly upon *two* implications of this short statement by the most influential thinker of the Christian West—this thoughtful old man whom, for good reasons, history has named *Saint* Augustine. I shall pin these two observations on two words both beginning with the letter M: *Mystery* and *Modesty*.

Mystery: Here is a man, an aged monk, who in his long lifetime has experienced nearly all the ups and downs of human existence, its passions and its perils. A man, a talented rhetorician, who has excelled in philosophy and the arts; who has become not only a bishop and leader of a small monastic community, but the

author of many influential books; who in his last years in his small North African town must witness—close up!—the disintegration and collapse of his once-great civilization, Rome—in short a man of wide experience and immense learning. And what is he saying, this old saint of the intellect? “We, who preach and write books *learn* as we go. We learn something new every day. Even in our old age we are still ‘knocking at the door of understanding.’” Perhaps we progress a little, but it is never very much; and *in relation to what we are trying to comprehend it is so little as to be nothing at all, really*.

This is because what we are attempting to understand is not a “what” but a Who, a living Being and the Source of all life. Not an object, but a Subject—“Thou” in Martin Buber’s language, never “It.” *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*, says Augustine in another place.³ “If you think you comprehend, it’s not God you’re talking about!” Where God is concerned, one does not *understand*, one “stands under.” And this first lesson of Christian theology applies not only to God, the Creator, but to all that God has made—including this planet and all its creatures, yes, including ourselves (for each one of us is a walking mystery that defies precise description).

Theology does not despise the disciplined and slow quest for knowledge; to the contrary, faith (as St. Anselm said) “has a voracious appetite for understanding.”⁴ Only those who have tried very hard to understand (tried perhaps, like Augustine, for a lifetime) know that they are dealing here with a mystery that defies comprehension. So do not imagine that you can

2. From Peter Brown’s Foreword of Henry Chadwick’s *Augustine of Hippo: a Life*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), xv [I have altered the first line of the quotation slightly in order to avoid certain misinterpretations. The original reads “while we make progress.” In a context where “progress” is a kind of secular credo, such a statement could lead to the erroneous idea that Augustine thinks that we “who write books, etc.” constantly grow better at our craft.]

3. *Sermo* 52, 16, PL. 38, 360.

4. *Fides quaerens intellectum* [usually translated “faith seeks understanding,” but “seeks” in this instance is too weak a verb. I prefer Karl Barth’s translation, which I have used here].

hold the attention of your children, your agnostic friends, or your congregation by endlessly repeating that it's all a mystery! You must have earned the right to speak of mystery by trying very diligently to comprehend. Nevertheless, if you are a minister or a Christian educator you should, I think, want your congregation to know that you, their teaching elder, are struggling every day with a living Subject you can neither master nor manipulate.

Where
Christian
faith and theology are
concerned, *confidence*
is permitted—even
to be hoped for;
but *certitude* never!
Si comprehendis, non
est Deus.

They should know that your sermons, your thoughts and words, do not come easily. Your speech and your manner should never convey the impression that you have some kind of expertise that ordinary people could not possess! Listen to what the old Augustine, the principal theologian of the West, says (in the same sermon from which I have quoted): "I urge you, dear congregation, that you should not take any previous book or preaching of mine as Holy Scripture!"⁵ He is not asking that

we all become mystics! But he is asking that we, "who preach and write books," should recognize in our own hearts and communicate to others the fact that we are in touch with a profoundly engaging and elusive mystery—the mystery of God, the mystery and miracle of Life. *Si comprehendis, non est Deus.*

But this leads directly to the *second implication* of Augustine's counsel: *modesty*. "Evangelical theology" said Karl Barth in his only American lectures in 1962—Protestant theology "is the most modest science."⁶ It is made modest, not because we are nice, modest middle-class people, but because the object of our quest for understanding is no object but a living Subject—Thou!

Dear colleagues, there is a great deal of immodest religion being noised about on our poor little planet today! The certitude with which some groups, individuals and whole institutions speak about God and the things of God is astonishing! It is also, given the realities of our "global village," the immediacy of our communications technologies, and the fragility of all our planetary systems and international relationships, extremely dangerous! Religious certitude and bravado is at the heart of nearly every global conflict today.

Unfortunately, much of this immodest religion comes from sources labeled Christian—often indeed, very, very Christian! Super-Christian! The older I become, the more amazed I am that so many Christians know so very much about God! God!—the Eternal Thou. The Wholly Other! God, whose revealing, as Luther said, is also a concealing!

op.cit.

6. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. by Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 7.

To all such religious certitude, we must learn to say (very politely, where possible)—No! Where Christian faith and theology are concerned, *confidence* is permitted—even to be hoped for; but *certitude* never! *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*. The God of the Exodus and of Gogotha invites us to trust—faith!—not to religious omniscience. *God permits theology*—but only when we know that it is a matter of God’s permission. When we think we do it as a right (because we have credentials!); or when we imagine that we’ve become quite good at it—just then we have lost touch with both the mystery and the modesty that belongs to the essence of the tradition of Jerusalem in which we stand.

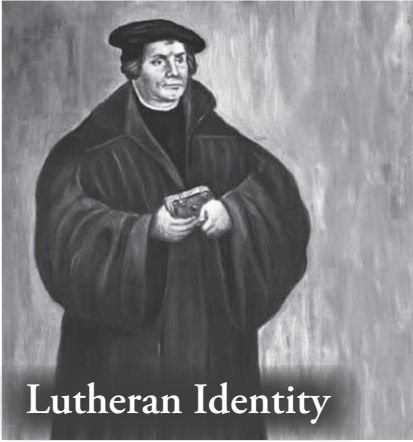
Friends, the Christian religion has been a great power in the Western world for most of its 2000-year history. That power—the power of numbers, wealth, and influence in high places—has lulled us into forgetfulness: we forget that One who in the wilderness and again in Gethsemane rejected precisely the way of power and chose the way of the cross. Jesus Christ invites us to discipleship—to service, not to preeminence. Religions that pursue the way of power today only exacerbate the horrendous worldly conflicts that seethe and bubble just beneath the surface of global existence in our time. If we Christians do not get over our centuries-long love affair with power, and learn the modesty of which Augustine’s quotation speaks, we shall continue to be (what in

many places, we quite patently are!) part of the world’s problems, not their solutions.

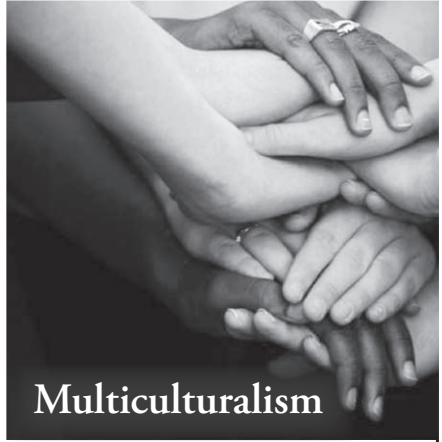
Now, that sometimes bombastic but deeply humble Augustinian whose splendid statue adorns the entrance of this institution—Martin Luther—understood the mystery and modesty of the Christian faith better, I think, that most other historic Protestant leaders. And that is why, though I am not a Lutheran, I have honored him in almost everything I have written. He called *true theology theologia crucis*—theology of the cross. It is the opposite of the kind of religious triumphalism and bravado (Christian and otherwise) that is tearing God’s beloved world apart today.

My dear co-graduands, you stand in a splendid tradition—a Christian tradition that is, I believe, unique in our North American religious history and reality. It is a tradition that is oriented toward truth, no matter how painful the truth may be—a tradition of hope, not of consummation; of faith, not of sight; and of love, not of power. In closing then, let me I wish you, in your life and ministry, whatever it may be, the joy of knowing and of conveying to others something of the depths, the mystery, and the modesty, that this blessed tradition holds for all who sincerely and diligently pursue it.

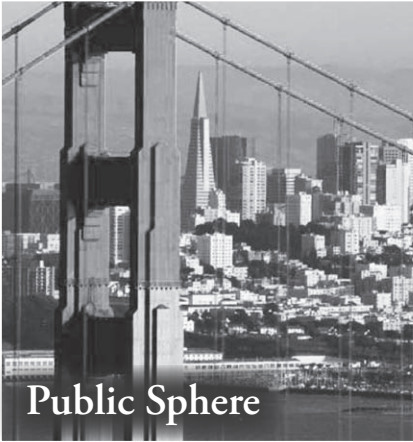
Amen.



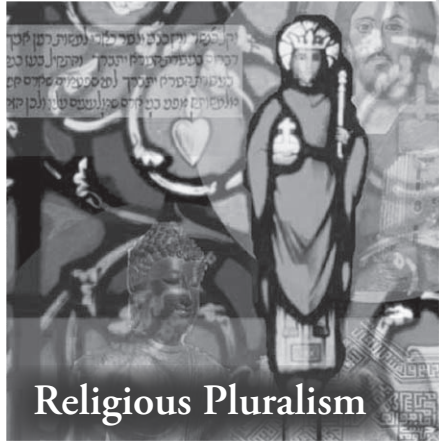
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Religious Pluralism

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Book Reviews

Worship as Repentance: Lutheran Liturgical Traditions and Catholic Consensus.

By Walter Sundberg. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6732-2. xvi and 190 pages. Paper. \$18.00.

This book is a critique of contemporary services of confession and forgiveness which offer unconditional absolution. At one time, most American Lutheranism offered only a conditional absolution—promising forgiveness to the penitent but also threatening judgment to the impenitent. Sundberg challenges the contemporary trend. For Sundberg, current practice is not in harmony with the ancient church or the Lutheran reformers. Instead, it is an outgrowth of therapeutic approaches to faith and the assumption that worship is “ritual participation in the divine.” For Sundberg, the core of worship should be repentance (xiii). Sundberg argues that the legitimate exercise of the office of the keys is to offer forgiveness only to the penitent. By doing otherwise, the contemporary church is unable to oppose the world, especially when it needs to.

Sundberg explains that the ancient church pushed higher moral standards in opposition to lax Roman moral practices. In contrast, the medieval church was apt to view the church as a mixture of saints and sinners. Luther did not advocate a more lax approach toward Christian behavior. Indeed, he maintained that those admitted to the Lord’s Table should “feel” genuine faith (68) and indicate contrition (68). The purpose of binding sin is to break human pride and thus enable people to live by faith (80). Luther instituted the *Verhör* in which a penitent was examined by the pastor prior to admittance to the Lord’s Table (85). Occasionally a confessor offered an unconditional absolution, but that was granted only to those who truly repented (88). In contrast, Andreas Osiander

consistently defended an unconditional absolution in opposition to Luther’s view which demanded faith of the penitent (93).

All in all, Sundberg’s work is challenging and demands thoughtful reflection. In a church concerned for justice, it would seem that calls for repentance are necessary.

Mark Mattes
Grand View University

Trauma and Transformation at Ground Zero: A Pastoral Theology.

By Storm Swain. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9805-8. x and 193 pages. Paper. \$27.00; Kindle edition \$17.59. (not available on Nook)

Trauma and Transformation at Ground Zero escorts readers to the top of the “Pile,” that nine-story high mountain of concrete, steel, and glass that was all that remained of the World Trade Center after the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11. From this vantage point, author Swain, an Episcopal priest, pastoral psychotherapist, and seminary professor, guides the reader on a remarkable, sacred journey, moving deftly through the pain and suffering of unspeakable loss to a place of transformation and healing.

Taking her cue from interviews with chaplains who served at the Temporary Mortuary (T. Mort.) near the site of the devastating attacks in New York City, Swain develops a trinitarian pastoral theology that reflects the image of God, realized in its outworking through human relationships. She expertly interweaves Augustinian theology, psychoanalytical theory, and contemporary pastoral practice to produce a cohesive pastoral theology that is true to classic doctrine, yet responsive to the complexity of the human context.

The most striking feature of the book is the sensitive manner with which Swain handles the sacred stories reflected in the experiences of the T.Mort. chaplains and her use of these narratives to develop a pastoral theology. Using the trinitarian framework of God’s role as earth-maker, pain-bearer, and



life-giver, Swain offers the corresponding pastoral practices of holding, suffering, and transforming that she personally observed during her own work at Ground Zero that had such a profound influence on firefighters, police, rescue workers, and families. The integration of D. W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory with chaplains' first-hand reflections of their ministry during such a difficult time provides the needed conversation between theology and the behavioral sciences.

Trauma and Transformation at Ground Zero is an excellent addition to any pastor's bookshelf, not only because of the valuable "snapshot in time" regarding pastoral care following an event that is etched in America's collective psyche, but because of its value in reframing the daily practice of pastoral care. While Swain's informative construct of holding space, suffering space, and transforming space is singularly worthy as a guiding principle for effective pastoral theology, the additional insight found in the recorded words of the chaplains make this work extraordinary.

C. David Reese

*The Lutheran Theological Seminary
at Philadelphia*

Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World. By Jens Zimmermann. Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012. ISBN:978-0-8308-3903-2. 356 pages. Paper. \$30.00.

This book is a response to the debilitating effects of secularism which increasingly cannot defend the value of reason, freedom, and human dignity apart from belief in God. Zimmermann claims that our response to such skepticism should be to remind the world that science, technology, and the above democratic ideals are rooted in Christian faith (26). It was early Christianity's "incarnational humanism," the view that God became human so that humanity can participate in God, which grounds life-affirming ideals (13, 53). Ultimately, then, these concepts are inferences about human nature as grounded ultimately in Cappadocian

trinitarianism. In contrast, nihilism stems from the opposition between thinking and being assumed by Kant. Zimmermann retrieves a Christian Platonism in which deifying participation in God reconceives mind and being as harmonious.

Zimmermann notes that contemporary society is not only post-Christian but also post-secular (41). Hence, affirmation of transcendence is more plausible today than several decades ago. At stake is the need to reaffirm a theological anthropology which is marked by the goal of deification—oneness with the triune life (83, 163). Such a goal brings coherence to various contingencies of human life within a meaningful framework, the triune life. After discussing the development of theological anthropology prior to the Enlightenment, Zimmermann documents its demise among the legacy of Kant, including Nietzsche. Even Christian apologists like Gianni Vattimo and John Caputo capitulate to such Kantianism by postulating God as incarnate in the "event" which however lacks an ongoing "real presence" (261).

The upshot is that the incarnation entails that our full humanity is manifest through cruciform service to others (304). This book merits the attention of thoughtful pastors and teachers seeking a Christian response to secularism.

Mark Mattes

The Letter to the Galatians. By Ian Christopher Levy. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8028-2223-9. xi and 277 pages. Paper. \$34.00.

This is the lead volume in Eerdmans' new series on *The Bible in Medieval Tradition*, which will focus on significant Latin commentaries which post-date the patristic age and pre-date the Reformation era. According to the series' editors, "critical engagement with medieval exegesis counteracts the twin dangers of amnesia and nostalgia" and at the same time "can exemplify how *not* to interpret the Bible" (x, emphasis added).



Levy has provided fresh translations of six significant medieval commentaries on Galatians, including those by monastic authors from the Carolingian period as well as by university professors from the scholastic age. The six authors treated here are **Haimo of Auxerre** (d. 866 CE), a French monk and abbot; **St. Bruno** (d. 1101), founder of Carthusian monasticism and dean of the cathedral school of Rheims; **Peter Lombard** (d. 1160), dean of the cathedral school and bishop of Paris and author of the *Sentences* summarizing Catholic doctrine; **Robert of Melun** (d. 1167), instructor at Paris, later bishop of Hereford, England; **Robert Grosseteste** (d. 1253), Oxford don and bishop of Lincoln; and **Nicholas of Lyra** (d. 1340), Franciscan theologian whose *Postilla Litteralis* was praised by Martin Luther and other Reformers.

Levy's seventy-eight page opening chapter is an eye-opening introduction to the aims and methods of medieval biblical scholarship. He points out that the scholastics were not so much interested in exploring the historical meaning of Paul's letter and the Galatians' situation, as much as they were intent on drawing out biblical insights for nurturing the faith and morals of their own contemporary audiences. In the process they employed figurative and allegorical resources and did not hesitate to relate seemingly unrelated texts to support otherwise orthodox conclusions (see Nicholas' summary of the "the fourfold sense" of Scripture [252]). Thus, argues Levy, "there is nothing naïve in the medieval belief that a text can have more than one meaning and the Holy Scripture, therefore, conveys sacred truth at different levels of perception" (10).

Today's readers may therefore expect to encounter unusual interpretations, for example: that "Galatia is actually a place in Greece" (131); that Paul was asked to remember the poor (Gal 1:10) because they "had sold all their goods" (193); that when Peter was rebuked by Paul (Gal 2:4) he became "a great example of humility" (194); that the Galatians had been bewitched (Gal 3:1) just as "the gaze of a menstruating woman infects the mirror that has been recently cleaned"

(217) and they saw Christ's crucifixion because they possessed "the four books of the Gospels" (95); that the troublemakers should be cut off (Gal 5:12) so they cannot produce more errorists "just as severed testicles cannot procreate" (175); that "those who are spiritual" (Gal. 6:1–2) refers to the prelates of the church and "the prelate is to bear the lay person's burden" (179–180); and that at the end of his letters "the Apostle would write his name with Hebrew characters" (128).

The central theological affirmation ranges from Grosseteste's nearly contradictory conclusions that "moral works do justify in some way" (221) to his later affirmation "that faith is freely confirmed and that it is not based on the believer's previous good works" (231).

Today's interpreters correctly focus on the historical message of the ancient biblical texts and their literary impact, but it may be a mistake for them to ignore the way those texts have been appropriated throughout the centuries. These forays into the interpretive history of Galatians—a seminal text for descendants of the Reformation—are thus valuable and insightful.

*Dr. Mark I. Wegener
Richfield, Minnesota*

The Book of Judges. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. By Barry G. Webb. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8028-2628-2. xx and 555 pages. Cloth. \$50.00.

Webb, an Australian Evangelical, has written a learned and sensitive interpretation of Judges. In his seventy-four page Introduction he reviews comprehensively and fairly the scholarly work on Judges during the last seventy years. That contribution alone will get readers up to speed.

He intends to present in his commentary the valid concerns of historical criticism, a new awareness of gender-related issues, and an emphasis on the need for self-awareness on the part of the reader on what he or she brings to the text and how this might influence his or



her reading of it for good or ill (42).

In a section on Judges and Christian Scripture he addresses two areas where Judges appears to be most at odds with the Christian life as the New Testament describes it: its portrayal of women, and its justification of violence. He notes that there are three kinds of war in Judges: wars of conquest and occupation; wars of liberation; and civil war. While acknowledging forthrightly the violence (there is in the account of the conquest something that is at fundamental variance with Christian morality, [61]), he holds to progressive revelation (and therefore a difference between the Old Testament and the New), but clearly confesses that it is the same God who is revealed in both testaments. I will confess that his conclusions are not always convincing, but I do give him credit for recognizing the issues. The following two sentences propose a solution to the violence that I do not find convincing: "There may be similarities between the wars of Judges and the Crusades, but the former are part of the canon and the latter are not. Hence they are not subject to our judgment in the same way the Crusades are" (62).

The commentary itself presents a fresh translation and an exegesis that is written in an "emotionally warm" way (his description of its style). Pastors and other educational leaders will find Webb's work a helpful guide throughout.

Ralph W. Klein
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Thinking About Christian Apologetics:

What It Is and Why We Do It. By James K. Beilby. Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2011. ISBN:978-0-8308-3945-2. Paper. \$17.00.

Written by James Beilby, an Evangelical, this book is not a primer in apologetics but instead offers a kind of prolegomena to apologetics, a defense of the Christian faith. Beilby focuses on the nature, history, and practice of apologetics, as well as approaches and objections to it. Usually, apologists do not reflect

on their own assumptions. This author frankly admits that many Christian apologists are arrogant in their attempt to defend Christianity (158).

Beilby distinguishes proactive from responsive apologetics. In the former, apologists claim that Christianity makes sense, while in the later they seek to show that objections to faith are unsuccessful (17). Helpfully, Beilby offers a bird's eye overview of apologetic stances gleaned from the Bible and the church fathers (such as Justin Martyr, Origen, Augustine), the Reformers (Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin), and the modern world (Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Newman, and Alvin Plantinga). The upshot of historical study is that at its best, apologetics is sensitive to and grows out of its intellectual milieu. Beilby notes that the three most important contemporary approaches to apologetics are (1) "evidentialism," which seeks to provide reasons to support faith, seen in the work of C. S. Lewis, (2) "presuppositionalism," which is skeptical of providing reasons for faith but does think that the weaknesses of unbelief should be exposed, exemplified in the work of Reformed theologians, such as Cornelius Van Til, and (3) "experientialism," which sees the truth of faith as grounded in religious experience, modeled in philosophers like William Alston.

It is valuable for mainline Christians to think about apologetics since they, as much as Evangelicals, presume an apologetic, even if they are not always aware of it.

Mark Mattes

Jeremiah: Pain and Promise. By Kathleen M. O'Connor. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8006-2040-0. xii and 179 pages. Cloth. \$42.00.

This study of significant passages from Jeremiah is enriched by trauma and disaster studies, that is, research on what happens to individuals and communities that have experienced war or natural disaster. In addition, the author reminds readers again and again of the real suffering and hardships that ac-



accompanied the Babylonian conquest of Judah and that form the context of the book of Jeremiah.

Chapters are devoted to the metaphor of a broken family, the war poems, the weeping poems, biographical stories about Jeremiah, the confessions, the sermons, the Little Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30–31), the various endings to the book, and the composition of the book itself. One of the many strengths of the book is its insistence that Judah's sin was not the only cause of its demise, but one also has to calculate in political mistakes made by Judean leadership and the greed and brutal policies of the Babylonian empire itself.

The author departs from standard source critical and redactional critical explanations for the book's chaotic shape. Rather, she holds that the book's turbulence depicts the interpretive disarray in Jeremiah's audience in the aftermath of Babylonian control (136). So the book is read in its final form. The point about the book's multiple endings is well taken. We do not know how Jeremiah died, presumably in Egypt, but the actual endings talk about the transference of Jeremiah's prophetic vocation to Baruch (chap. 45), the Babylonian empire's catastrophic destruction in an unspecified future (chaps. 50–51), and the flat telling of the Babylonian invasion in chap. 52, which is a near verbatim citation of 2 Kings 25. The two main characters in the book—God and Jeremiah—are absent from the final chapter. O'Connor takes no notice of the alternate location of the oracles against the nations in the Septuagint. Her understanding of the relationship between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text (159, n. 2) is in my judgment deficient.

In dozens of cases, her use of trauma and disaster studies to illuminate the text of Jeremiah is very helpful, but there are also some questionable choices. The new covenant passage promises that "they will all know me," and she argues that to know actual Yahweh means to relate in intimacy, sexual knowledge, and reciprocity. It is much more likely, in my opinion, that to know Yahweh means to care for the cause of the poor and needy (Jer 22:16), in imitation of Josiah. She is rightly attentive to gender issues although

her attempt to distinguish between wife Judah and male Israel in Jeremiah 2 does not work so well.

One of the most troubling aspects of Jeremiah is the violence attributed to Yahweh. Some of her comments are helpful, some not. One caption speaks about God's War against a Woman (6:1–30), but the woman in this case is Jerusalem. She argues that God rapes Zion/Jerusalem (Jer 13:25–26), although those verses describe God's exposing the nakedness of adulterous Judah and her shame. I am quite dissatisfied with that picture of the deity, but it is not rape. O'Connor tries to rescue the picture of God as rapist by saying that it shows Judah's God as powerful, active, and present, lord of the world and not a defeated lesser being, or to depict God as the active agent of Judah's humiliation is to insist that Babylonian deities have not triumphed (55). It might have been better to label these images as part of the limitations of Jeremiah. The point of Jer 2:33–3:5 is not that Yahweh has divorced Judah, but that an adulterous Judah should not expect to be able to return to Yahweh.

There is a great deal of valuable information in the endnotes, and so it is a pity that they are not footnotes. Gedaliah is spelled incorrectly on four occasions, and proof reading left in this line: "like the Hebrew slaves when they escaped into the dessert" (36).

Thanks to trauma and disaster studies as exemplified here, I will never read Jeremiah the same way again.

Ralph W. Klein

The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society. By Brad S. Gregory. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-6740-4563-7. 573 pages. Hardcover. \$39.95.

This magisterial work is certain to get the blood flowing in the minds of those loyal to the legacy of the Protestant Reformation. The central thesis of Gregory, Professor of Early Modern European History at the University



of Notre Dame, is that the Reformation contained within itself the seeds of many unforeseen and unintended consequences, which have led inexorably to many of the fragmenting characteristics of contemporary society, most of all to the failure of post-modern society in addressing what the author calls "Life Questions."

Marvelously documented (145 pages of endnotes) and intellectually provocative, the author argues in succeeding chapters how the Reformation contributed to the exclusion of God from the public square, the relativizing of doctrines, state control of the churches, the subjectivizing of morality, the emergence of consumerist society, and the secularizing of knowledge. The secularization process, as accelerated by the Reformation, has meant the marginalizing of God and theology in the university and thereby from public policy making, leading to the disintegration of the social foundations of ethics. These developments opened the door to the prevalence of "moralistic therapeutic deism" as the philosophical basis for consumer capitalism.

As one key countermove, Gregory argues that the academy now needs to re-engage theological knowledge: "Those who bring religious perspectives to bear must be prepared to argue for their claims in intellectually coherent ways and based on knowledge of the assumptions and findings of the academic disciplines with which they engage. But the a priori exclusion of religious truth claims from research universities is no longer intellectually justifiable and might well be closing off potentially important avenues for addressing some of our many contemporary problems" (386).

This book is rich fare for the committed reader. It adds major critical perspective for reassessing the intellectual heritage of the Reformation as we move toward its 500th anniversary. While the arguments are sometimes overdrawn, Gregory provides much stimulation for pondering how we arrived where we are in the post-modern world and what the Reformation might have to do with that.

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Creator God Evolving World. By Cynthia Crysdale and Neil Ormerod. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9877-5. xiv and 168 pages. Paper. \$18.00.

The ongoing, and often tedious, dialogue between science and religion is a topic many will likely face in their ministry, whether as ordained leaders or laity. In the work *Creator God Evolving World* a "third path" is offered between the commonly held polar positions of conflict. Crysdale and Ormerod draw heavily upon the work of Bernard Lonergan and proceed to lay out a tangible and coherent approach to the debate. Their central claim is that religion and science are not in conflict but must be understood as complementary to each another, each providing a different type of knowledge to humanity.

Throughout the work they discuss a wide variety of areas of scientific research. A historical look at Newtonian mechanics leads into a discussion of quantum mechanics, which has reintroduced an in-deterministic understanding of the universe. After discussing physics and cosmology, the authors analyze Darwinian evolution and introduce Lonergan's concept of *finality*. Finality is defined as "'the upwardly but indeterminately directed dynamism' of world process." They argue, quite persuasively, that one can accept Darwinian evolution while still holding open the possibility for the contingency of the results. Walking the line between hard-line determinism and complete contingency, Crysdale and Ormerod offer a refreshing and novel approach to the exchange between deterministic evolution and creationism.

While we are given a compelling new picture of the interaction between science and religion, there is a sense of defensiveness throughout the book. In any work discussing both science and religion, one must always be careful not to "tie-down" God to any specific scientific theory. At the same time one cannot promote a "God of the gaps." The authors leave readers with the open compatibility between theism and contemporary science, but there is no strong resolution beyond this point. While we are required to accept this



stance, it may be seen by some as potentially upsetting.

The final chapters transition into a discussion of free will, the problem of evil, and questions of morality. While these are intriguing areas, ripe for discussion, they are not necessary components to the overall goal of the work. This is an excellent addition to the ongoing dialogue between science and religion, one that does not take an exclusivist position, which would lead to an end of healthy discussion. The theories and terminology are

presented in a manner easily approachable by those who may not have a strong scientific background, yet are sophisticated enough to captivate the interest of those well versed in the areas presented. The presentation of a "third way" offers great potential to allow Christians to keep alive their religious faith, while holding fast to the mind-expanding scientific discoveries of our time.

*Brandon Sundh
Wartburg Theological Seminary*



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Preaching Helps

Pentecost 20–Thanksgiving

Preaching Helps!

At LSTC, we teach our students to be open to the Holy Spirit speaking through the church. Once in awhile, professors—like pastors—must put their teachings into personal practice in surprising ways. So, when people in the ELCA's North/West Lower Synod lifted up my name as a “potential nominee” for the Office of Bishop, my family and I were open to the Spirit speaking through church. When I was, in fact, nominated, I entered into the process and am blessed to find myself transitioning from a multifaceted ministry based in Chicago to an episcopal ministry home in Michigan. The Spirit spoke through the church as the North/West Lower Michigan Synod elected me their bishop. As you read this in August, I expect to be closing up shop at LSTC, attending the ELCA Churchwide Assembly with my synod, and transitioning into my new call. I assume the Office of Bishop on September 1 and will be installed on September 22. I covet your prayers for my synod, my family, my ministry, and for me, as well as for LSTC, the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program, the Master of Divinity Program at The University of Notre Dame, and whomever is privileged to serve as the next editor of “Preaching Helps”

I have loved editing this section of *Currents* for these almost-twelve years. I always spent New Year's Day editing, so I will need to find something else to do. I am particularly grateful for this page on which to share my reflections on preaching, for the opportunity to carefully read perspectives on the lectionary readings that come from and are intended for preachers, and for the gift of giving people who never imagined they would—or always wanted to—the chance to write. Most impressive for me are words Robert Smith passed on to me, which he shared with authors: “The only “pay” we can offer contributors is a complimentary copy of the issue with your contribution (so kindly include your mailing address) and the satisfaction of knowing that your work is used and appreciated by the subscribers of the magazine, as they preach the **GOOD NEWS** week after week.” For the vast majority of contributors, that was compensation enough.

The other thing Bob Smith told me is that “Preaching Helps” has a double meaning in that “Helps” was intended to function both as a noun and as a verb. I am staking my episcopacy on my firm belief that preaching *helps* Paraphrasing St. Paul, as I have in homiletics classrooms for five years as an apprentice at Notre Dame and for thirteen years as a professor at LSTC, “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others, but to us who are the called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22–24). I most look forward to proclaiming the gospel as good news throughout my synod, particularly preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments to strengthen rostered and congregational leaders. Preaching (Christ crucified and risen) *helps*!

I am grateful to then Dean Kadi Billman and Ralph W. Klein for entrusting this ministry to me, to the editors—first Klein, then the team of Billman, Hendel and Swanson—for keeping their mitts off my work, even when doing so was hard, and to Peggy Blumenberg for teaching me the ropes and Ann Rezny for keeping me on track.

I have pushed authors to answer the “so what?” question when doing exegesis, to focus on what God or Christ or the Spirit is doing, and to name the good news for us. When my preaching students finally “get” preaching “good news,” radical grace, rather than what people *should*, *ought* or *must* do, they experience such joy. Over the years, I have prayed that my reflections on preaching and the commentaries on the lectionary readings *help* you to experience that same joy. This is indeed my prayer as I complete my stewardship of “Preaching Helps” and commend this work to the next editor.

The peace of Christ be with you always!

Craig A. Satterlee, bishop-elect, North/West Lower Michigan Synod ELCA
Still at <http://craigasatterlee.com>

Preaching Helps for this issue were prepared by Paul Lutter, who currently serves as Senior Pastor of First Lutheran Church in Litchfield, Minn. He has served congregations in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and once served as Lutheran campus pastor in Nebraska. Pastor Lutter has done post-graduate study at Marquette University and Luther Seminary in Reformation Theology and Systematic Theology/Ethics. He has taught as an adjunct instructor in the religion departments of Augsburg and Gustavus Adolphus Colleges, and in preaching at Luther Seminary, all in Minnesota.

Pentecost 20

October 6, 2013

Psalm 37:1–9

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Luke 17:5–10

This week's gospel lesson from Luke catches Jesus in the middle of some important matters before leaders of both early and present Christian communities. Jesus has just warned those gathered, "... woe to anyone by whom ["occasions for stumbling"] come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown in to the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble." (Luke 17:1b–2) This sets the stage for Jesus to describe, in short form, how the Christian community goes about the difficult but essential work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

This week's gospel lesson finds the disciples in a bit of a huff: "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5b) Some may wish to read this comment by the disciples a little more charitably. Could it be that the disciples' response to Jesus' invectives against the disciples acting in such a way that others would not stumble, and toward modeling how forgiveness and reconciliation might be faithfully lived out in Christian community, so that, perhaps, it might also be lived out in connection with communities of people who are not Christian, would be to pray for Jesus' help in doing so?

Yet, Luke's rendering of Jesus' response suggests that perhaps the disciples have forgotten what they've been given—and who they are. The description of "faith the size of a mustard seed" in verse 6 suggests that all that is needful is already given. It's also noteworthy that

Luke precedes this description by naming the hearers not as disciples at this point, but as apostles; the gift of faith is not an insular thing—it is given so that those who receive might be sent out into the world God so loves to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

In what remains in this lesson, Jesus describes who these apostles are. Before they are sent out, apostles are armed with the knowledge that the hymn "How Great Thou Art" is not written about them, but about the One who sent them—us. Instead, apostles are people who are sinners ("worthless slaves," v. 10), constantly aware not of their entitlement but of their need for grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness by God who raises Jesus from the dead for us. By God's grace, apostles are also forgiven, set free, and set out for the sake of the gospel.

In the sixteenth century, one of the (many) struggles within the church was whether or not a priest needed to be without sin in order to ensure that the sacrifice of the Mass was effective. In the twenty-first century, other controversies emerge that raise essentially the same question, but in a wider way: does the Christian community need to be pure, blameless, and spotless in order to witness to Jesus Christ in the world? Further, who gets to decide what does and does not make the church "pure," "blameless," and "spotless"? And even further, *can* the church be "pure," "blameless," and "spotless"?

In my work both as a pastor and teacher, one of the things I hear and see over and over again through both word and deed is that the Christian community needs to be perfect in order to effectively proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. When I engage people further about this, wondering where and how they learned it, invariably I hear that this is what they've seen lived

out in their experience with Christian communities in the past—and present.

What would it mean for the Christian community to take seriously the reality of our identity as *both* sinful *and* forgiven? How, in our worship, do we make space to experience both realities? How, in our preaching, do we name both realities? Making space and naming only one of the realities without the other does not set people free. One without the other does not send people out into the world.

Several years ago, a now deceased pastor friend of mine told of visiting a parishioner who was dying of cancer. In this person's hospital room were littered notes of good wishes for a quick recovery. Bright balloons filled with helium sprayed across the ceiling, spelling out the phrase, "Get Well Soon." People gathered around this patient were joking and laughing and catching up on the latest bit of gossip. My friend sat down next to his parishioner, took her hand, and said, "So, you're dying." Everyone—except for the parishioner—stopped what they were doing and gasped in shock and disbelief. The parishioner looked at her pastor and said, "Yes, thank God, you understand me!" Alive, but dying, this person needed to hear both realities; in the words of her pastor, she did.

In this week's gathering around word and sacrament—means by which God's grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness are really present for those who are anything but pure, blameless, or spotless of their own accord, but who are these things (and more) on account of Jesus Christ—one of the questions the preacher could engage is what it means to be a community who is simultaneously sinful and forgiven. How do both identities shape how we invite others to go about the work of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ through word and deed in the world? PL

Pentecost 21 **October 13, 2013**

Psalm 111

2 Kings 5:1–3

2 Timothy 2:8–15

Luke 17:11–19

We don't know who they were at the beginning of the story; the gospel lesson doesn't give them each a name. They are described only by two identifying factors: they were lepers all. And they each came from somewhere, a location, a place where they were once known and welcome; and now, because they were lepers, they were cast out. They were "between Samaria and Galilee." They were nowhere. They were on the border between life and death, waiting to die.

Some have called what transpires between Jesus and the ten as a cleansing; others, a healing. It is both, but it is also more, because it is not *only* among the ten who are cast out—including a Samaritan, of all people—that something new happens. There is something that happens "in between," as dead space becomes liminal.¹

The ten "approached," but then also "kept their distance" from Jesus. Common readings of this text suggest that this is expected given the fact that either they were prohibited from entering the village and/or they didn't want to expose Jesus (or others) to their leprosy. Both were real issues, as was the issue of the struggle

1. My theological imagination is opened to this possible reading of the text after reading Vitor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). See also his earlier discussion of liminality in Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 110, 156.

for recognition—an understatement, for sure—between Jews and Samaritans, made manifest in this text by the presence of not only Jewish lepers, but also a Samaritan.

Yet it is striking to note that even in their animosity toward one another, the Samaritan and the Jews shared this “in between” dead space with one another. Already in the land of the dead, there is liminality in this text; already something new is occurring. As they stand together, “in between,” they cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17:13b) While it is intimated otherwise in the text, might it be the case that those crying out were not only human, but also the whole creation as well? (See Rom 8:22)

And so the ten emerge from the land of the dead to that of the living; “they were made clean” (Luke 17:14c). Acknowledging their cries, Jesus begins to transform them, yet not only them. Hearing and speaking from the land of the living into death itself, Jesus transgresses the boundaries in creation between death and life, and redefines its limits.

When the Samaritan returns, “praising God with a loud voice,” it appears to disrupt Jesus. “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:15b, 18) What might this mean that even Jesus is surprised at the power of God to “turn back” this “foreigner”? (Luke 17:15b) That the Jews did not turn back, despite Jesus’ apparent umbrage, is not necessarily surprising, given both that this is what Jesus calls them to do and that this is what the Law commands.

Drawing this all together, perhaps the question the preacher could explore in their preaching this week is what spaces and places in the congregation and community appear “in between,” liminally awaiting God to enter in and do a new, new thing?

In writing this, I was thinking about a recent experience that illustrates why this question may be a vital one. First, in the community in which I serve, there are several trailer parks, inhabited mostly by immigrant workers. This is unfortunately (and clearly prejudicially) considered by many to be dead space. Instead of engaging the space as liminal, many in the community consider it the land of the dead.

I wonder what might happen in this community when this text is both read and preached, and through it, God begins to slowly help them to realize that Jesus has transgressed the boundaries between dead and living space among them.

The point of raising questions about the liminality of spaces and places in our midst is not to draw our focus away from, to obfuscate, what occurs in the text between Jesus and the ten, but rather to underscore the radical reach of God’s grace, mercy, and healing. Since God transgresses death’s boundary by reaching through and destroying it, this is good news for the whole creation God so loves (John 3:16).

Should the preacher want to try something else, what might it look like to engage this text as one of the nine who has gone to the priest, as Jesus has directed them, and looks back to see the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan? When has the grace of God come, but in unexpected ways, for others in our midst, and not just ourselves? Where in the daily realities of your ministry do you see this sort of thing occurring? Or, what if you engaged this text as if you were the Samaritan, or even one of the villagers watching all this occur? PL

Pentecost 22

October 20, 2013

Psalm 121

Genesis 32:22–31

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Luke 18:1–8

It's always helpful, isn't it, when the gospel writers tell us what the text is about before we even read it? That's what Luke does here: this parable is about two things: "[our] need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

This is sheer conjecture, but I wonder if the reason behind Luke's clear thesis statement before the actual parable is that while it is rather straightforward, how one goes about engaging it in our present context creates a maze for which there is no clear exit point. Reflecting on the parable in light of the present moment has caused me to rewrite what you have before you more times than I care to admit.

I wonder if another way to engage Luke's thesis statement is to say that this parable is about injustice in both its human and divine manifestations. Underneath the give and take between the persistent widow and the merciful judge is a question of the relationship between the difference in activity between God and us. There is injustice on both fronts, but each of a different ilk. Human injustice occurs when what one person does benefits them and comes at the expense of another; God's injustice comes at God's own expense and greatly benefits others.

We don't know what exactly is the cause of the widow's cries of injustice. It wouldn't take long to imagine what it could be, but we don't have any clear indication. What we do know is that the widow is utterly persistent in seeking

justice from the judge. Were this not a parable, but a true story, one might wonder why the widow didn't ask for the judge to recuse himself and another judge be found. Yet, as it is told, this widow spends considerable time both asking and waiting.

We don't know what the hold up is on the judge's end from granting the request of the widow. But one thing seems clear: when the judge grants the widow's plea, it is done not as a matter of law, but rather as one of grace and mercy. It lives not out of a place of obligation, but promise.²

These reflections of the injustice of God are borne out when Jesus himself calls God unjust in doing what God promises to do for those "who cry to him day and night" (Luke 18:8).

What would it mean for the judge, for *God*, to actually be just, at least according to the logic of the parable? Would it mean that he would *not* listen to the widow? Certainly God would not turn a deaf ear. Or, might it mean that God would use the law, and not grace and mercy, as the guides by which he responded? While law sings, it is grace and mercy that are the verses of the song of salvation by which the angels sing louder and God dances in and into our lives.

What are we to do with the thesis that Luke places before us in our text, that we are called on to pray and to not give up hope? I'm more than reticent to suggest a sermon (or a series of sermons)

2. There is a helpful discussion of the relationship between prayer and promise in a chapter, "Promise and Prayer," at the close of Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Thomas H. Trapp, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 346–354. See also Gregory Walter, *Being Promised: Theology, Gift, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

on prayer. In light of the recent trend toward attending to practice rather than pedagogy in some Christian theological circles, it might be far more effective to pray with and among the people whom you are serving than it would be to extol people in a sermon to actually pray.

With that said, if one were to go about preaching about prayer, one could do far worse than to engage this text with the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. The sermon then takes the form of a prayer that invites people to join along in the persistent crying out to God to act.

One may, in concert with this, use Luther's explanations of the petitions to the Lord's Prayer. People may turn to the back of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (or use a Small Catechism) in order to reflect and pray as you preach. One of the really gorgeous parts of these explanations is that they begin in promise and end in petition. One example may suffice. In response to the Third Petition, ("May your will come about on earth as in heaven"), Luther writes, "In fact, God's good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us."³ PL

Reformation October 27, 2013

Psalms 46

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Romans 3:19–28

John 8:31–36

Some will use Reformation Sunday as an opportunity to preach about Martin Luther's life, his theology, his on-going influence now that we are just a few years away from the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Some, instead, will want to preach *against* Luther, citing his part in the Peasant Revolt or his writings against the Jews. Others will want to situate Luther's contribution to the ecumenical movement. And still others will want to talk about him in the context of the communion of saints. Some will be tempted to give a lecture (instead of a sermon) on the centrality of justification by faith alone in the Lutheran Reformation—and in our lives.

Let me urge you to do **none** of these things.

Want to talk about the enduring legacy of Luther's theology? Want to point out Luther's flaws as a human being and a scholar? (He'd be just fine with that, by the way.) Want to talk about justification by faith alone?

Then preach the texts before you, and let *them*—the texts—do the talking.

Now, having said all of that, I'm going to say something as to why I'm urging this way of going about celebrating Reformation. There would be no Reformation, no Luther, without the word or the Word made flesh. All of the catchy sayings attributed to Luther and the Reformation point to Jesus Christ, and him crucified and raised for our sake. Every single controversy or struggle Luther was in was born out of the Word. Every bit of wisdom, every little

3. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, trans. and ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 357.

quip from Luther that you're just aching to put into a Reformation sermon will point you right back to the Word.

You see, *Reformer* was not on Luther's business card. Luther was a pastor and professor, deeply concerned about the centrality of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that, once confronted by it, changed his life forever. And so it does for those to whom you will preach on Reformation Sunday. And, if you're not careful, the Spirit may even do some reforming in your life as a result of the preached Word, too.

The very heart of the gospel message that comes from John 8:31–36 is summed up in one word: Freedom. The kind of freedom that is announced by Jesus in this text has nothing at all to do with the kind of freedom we talk about in the United States. For in the United States, it is often the case that freedom is synonymous with doing whatever we want to do at the time, no matter how it hurts or ignores. What we often describe as freedom is really bondage to sin, because it is focused on ourselves.

"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Upon this verse rests the good news of the gospel itself. Freedom, we're told from this verse in John's gospel, depends not upon *us*, but upon *Jesus Christ*. But what does freedom mean? What is Jesus getting at?

While I urged you above not to preach Martin Luther but Jesus Christ, I didn't say you couldn't use him as an illustration. In 1520, Luther wrote his famous sermon, *The Freedom of a Christian*. In the very beginning of this text, he describes the Christian life as being free, on account of Jesus Christ alone, from the power of sin, death and the devil, and free for care and service of the neighbor, whomever that may be. This paradox is fairly well-known, and yet it gets lost in the realities of life that make us seem a whole lot less free than Luther describes. The problem

is the emphasis on one or the other of the statements, or that the former is somehow (and erroneously) understood as hinging on the latter.

When we preach a freedom that results from Christ alone, we are saying something about our inability to set ourselves free, either in salvation or in caring for or serving our neighbors. Yet, Christ's death and resurrection sets us so free in relationship to God that it spills over into our life together. This is more than just news. It's good news for Martin Luther, for you and me, and for those whom we serve in Christ's name. This kind of freeing good news is the very calling card of the Reformation, celebrated not only this day, but every day. PL

All Saints November 3, 2013

Psalm 149

Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18

Ephesians 1:11–23

Luke 6:20–31

The reversals Jesus describes in Luke 6:20–31, like the whole life of following Jesus into which we are called, suggests that the ways and wisdom of God are not what we might expect. Once one clears away what we expect *from* God, this text opens up for us *how* and *where* God is present *among* us in the world. In the latter part of the text, we are invited not only to witness where God is present, but also to engage in the work of God in the world.

This text, like its counterpart in Matthew's gospel, describes the blessed life, though even a cursory glance between the two will suggest that Matthew and Luke are up to something similar yet different from one another in their portrayals of Jesus' life

and teachings. It's in Luke's version of the sermon that Jesus gives that we see a more concrete socioeconomic hermeneutic at work. And so, it's in Luke that Jesus does not talk about the "poor in spirit," as does Jesus in Matthew's account; rather, in Luke, Jesus describes the blessed as those who are "poor," that is, socioeconomically diverse (see Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20b).

As stunning as the picture Jesus develops about *who* is blessed is the depiction of who is *not*, at least in light of the good news of the gospel. It is intriguing to think that the very picture of those who are blessed according not only to the world but also some within the larger church who espouse a "prosperity gospel" are *precisely* those who are *not* blessed according to Jesus in Luke's account. This particular listing of "woes" are unique to Luke, owing again to the socioeconomic hermeneutic at play.

On All Saints Sunday, we remember and give thanks for the life and witness of those who have died over the past year (or more). We give thanks for the ways in which God continues to use the memory of their life and witness to empower those of us who as yet walk by faith and not sight to do the work of ministry.

Yet, I wonder how the ways that we talk about the life and witness of those who have died in Christ and have completed their baptismal adventure is commensurate with the ways in which Luke's Jesus describes those who are blessed. Please don't misunderstand me; I think it's important that we give thanks for the gifts and ministry of all God's saints. Yet I wonder if we draw the line too neatly, too clearly, between those who are and are not blessed. I wonder if we don't sometimes get mixed up with who we consider blessed or not.

Over a year ago, I preached and co-presided at a funeral for an eight-year-

old child who died of a brain tumor. He was a terrific kid, involved in all sorts of things, and beloved by the congregation and wider community. When he died, over 800 people came to his visitation, and over 1,100 people packed a high school gymnasium as together we heard the good news of the gospel that in death there is life.

Several months earlier, I preached and presided at the funeral of a five-month-old boy who died because of respiratory failure. Neither he nor his family was well known in the community; in fact, not all those who knew them were glad to be so acquainted. When this little boy died, very few attended either the visitation or funeral.

Both families were deeply in need of hearing the good news of the gospel to which they clung. Both children and their families were blessed. Yet, the community inherently made an unintentional decision about which of these children was more blessed by their presence and participation in the arduous work of grieving with the family.

Thanks be to God, of course, that whether one is blessed or not is God's, and not ours, to declare or decide. Wrapped in the promises of God in baptism, fed at the table, and ears full of the promises of God through the Word, we are invited, empowered, and sent out to participate in the blessed work of God by doing such things as "lov[ing] those who hate you, bless[ing] those who curse you, pray[ing] for those abuse you" (Luke 6:27–28). If not hard enough, Jesus closes out this week's text by calling us to, "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

Our callings in the world are not easy as we follow Jesus to places and among people with whom we would rather not associate. Yet, here is where one is declared

a saint: when a sinner depends not on their own power to love, forgive, care for, and live among others, but on God's power to love, forgive, heal, and save. PL

Pentecost 25

November 10, 2013

Psalms 17:1–9

Job 19:23–27a

2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17

Luke 20:27–38

As a college student, I was involved in Lutheran Campus Ministry. There, I began to ask real questions about God, myself, and the world; these questions, I learned, were really much more important than the answers that opened up before me. The Lutheran campus pastor taught me not only about the value of asking questions, but also the art of walking with those whose questions are a matter of life and death to them.⁴

It wasn't until much later on that I realized something that was occurring in that experience. In the midst of the questions I was learning to ask, I never really received *answers*. Rather, the response of my campus pastor was to reach deep into the storehouse of Scripture and hand over *promises* that completely resonated with and transformed me from the inside out. The power of those promises continues to shape my imagination both in the questions I ask and the ways I walk among others in their own.⁵

4. See Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001).

5. I owe this moment of later insight

Questions are powerful things. Promises are *even more* powerful.⁶

When the Sadducees ask Jesus a question, the text before us does not indicate whether or not it was to trick or to open up a moment of promise. Either way, the question they ask is this: "In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be? For...seven had married her" (Luke 20:33). This question is the very kind that makes both church historians and systematic theologians salivate. There's neither time nor breath enough to answer such questions that the Sadducees ask Jesus from the pulpit. Even Jesus himself doesn't really *answer* the questions posed to him.

Jesus doesn't answer their questions; he makes promises in their midst.

Dealing with the preliminary matters related to marriage in the resurrection, Jesus then zeros in on the crux of the issue: in the resurrection, are the dead really raised? Well over half of Jesus' response to the Sadducees focuses not on the presenting question of marriage, but on the question of the reality of resurrection. Reaching back into the Old Testament, namely to the story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3, Jesus points to the promise of resurrection before Jesus even shows up on the scene.⁷ A few

to Dr. Jessicah Krey Duckworth. See also David Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 21–42. My thanks to Dr. Duckworth for also pointing me to Kelsey's book.

6. On the nature and power of promise in general and in Martin Luther's theology in particular, see the outstanding study by Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989).

7. For a recent engagement between Christians and Jews in matters related to

chapters later Luke's gospel will provide more questions from, and even more powerful promises for, everyone (even the disciples who followed Jesus around everywhere) in the face of Jesus' death and resurrection in their midst.

The power of the promise Jesus makes does not quickly (ever?) transform the Sadducees as far as the reader can tell. But it does quell whatever the reason for their question. More, in the silence of the Sadducees in response to Jesus' promise to them, room is made for other questions and other promises to emerge in response until that day when Jesus comes again.

In light of this discussion of promise in this text, perhaps it would be a helpful move for the preacher to help distinguish for the hearers the nature of promise both from humans and from Jesus Christ. This would provide rich fare for both preacher and hearer to acknowledge those places and spaces where promises made and received by others have fallen short, despite the best intentions of the one who makes promises. Further, this would clear the way to describe the way that promise works when it comes from Jesus Christ.

Another way into the text might be to provide space for those gathered to ask (or write down) questions they have always wondered about related to God, Jesus, Spirit, the word, church, etc. Whether those gathered are new to the faith or old hands, there may be many—or few—questions. Where there are questions, legitimizing by engaging them will clear the way for the power of promise to be realized.

Perhaps the sermon ends by actually handing over the promises that Jesus

Christ makes to and for us. Go all out on this; don't limit yourself to a few. Cull through any of the gospels (or Paul, or the Old Testament, or...) and collect a bevy of promises that will both resonate and transform from the inside out those who gather together in Jesus' name. PL

Pentecost 26

November 17, 2013

Psalm 98

Malachi 4:1–2a

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

Luke 21:5–19

Martin Luther's was an apocalyptic worldview.⁸ One need only read his sermons or sing hymns he wrote to understand this point.⁹ Take, for example, the verse in *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, in which Luther puts in our mouths these words:

*Though hordes of devils fill the land,
all threatening to devour us,
we tremble not, unmoved we stand,*

8. The *locus classicus* in this regard is Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale, 2006). For an important discussion on the role of apocalyptic in theology, see Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink, eds. *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012).

9. See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* Thomas H. Trapp, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Bayer's reading of Luther is shaped by engagement with such things as Luther's sermons and hymn texts. One of the genius' of Bayer's interpretation of Luther is that he uses form criticism to engage Luther's sermons and hymns, as well as his better-known writings, in order to let Luther speak anew.

the question of resurrection, see Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven: Yale, 2008).

*they cannot overpower us.
This world's prince may rage, in fierce
war engage.
He is doomed to fail; God's judgment
must prevail!
One little word subdues him.* (ELW 503)

In such a worldview, the end is close at hand; hope is even closer still. Fear rails against us, “threatening to devour us”; yet, “God’s judgment must prevail.” Thus, “we tremble not, unmoved we stand,” since, “one little word subdues him.”

It might be said that Jesus has an apocalyptic worldview. Jesus warns his disciples in this gospel passage about the end’s imminence; specifically, Jesus prepares his followers for the destruction of the Temple. Jesus does not pull punches in his description of what this will mean not only for the Temple, but also for those who would follow Jesus.

Popular engagement with and interpretation of such a worldview emphasizes and creates fear that paralyzes. One thinks of Cormac McCarthy’s popular novel-turned-movie *The Road* as illustrative of this point.¹⁰ Yet, this would be a misreading of the apocalyptic texts in Scripture in general, and in this text in particular. For, at every turn, Jesus both names what will happen, and then provides a promise to give his hearers comfort, strength, and hope in the midst of it. As a result, fear, it would seem, gives way to hope.¹¹

Listen in, then, as Jesus speaks hope that is real and present in this text. Pay attention to the powerful way that fear is acknowledged and dispelled. Marvel at how Jesus scatters the darkness.

...I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. (Luke 21:15–19).

While it is not the felling of a Temple that leads us to fear that paralyzes, the things in our lives that bring us to that point are as central. This is particularly true in the life, mission, and ministry of the people to whom we have been called to serve. Ironically, one of the larger concerns looming for congregations both large and small that seek to live out of a worldview that is commensurate with an actual world that existed fifty or so years ago is whether or not the doors of their congregation will be open in ten years or so. Will they have to close and scatter to other congregations in the surrounding communities?

This text also speaks to the persecution some congregations now face because they would dare to speak the gospel into and for the world God so loves. True, the forms of persecution in North America tend to be less life-threatening in the sense that people will probably not be hung on crosses if they confess the name of Jesus Christ. Yet, the power of persecution, in whatever form, seeks to quiet the church from confessing and professing the faith in which we are baptized. Sometimes that persecution comes from *outside* the church, for sure; equally true, however, is that certain forms of subtle persecution can exist within it. Those who read these words have their own stories as to how this might be true in their own contexts.

10. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

11. See Jason C. Whitehead, *Redeeming Fear: A Constructive Theology for Living into Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

In the face of such things, this text invites the preacher to name the realities, the fear, and the hope that is present in their midst. It is an invitation to speak truth to power, forgiveness to sin, and life to death. It is an opportunity to empower and equip people to stand up when all hell is breaking loose and speak a word that transforms for Christ's sake. PL

Christ the King November 24, 2013

Psalm 46

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Colossians 1:11–20

Luke 23:33–43

Unlike other lectionary years, Year C celebrates Christ the King with Jesus dying on a cross, flanked by two others who were also convicted and sentenced to death. This is as it should be, given that it is on the cross where Jesus demonstrates what it *really* means to be king: not in great acts of power, strength, and prestige; but in suffering, weakness, and death for the sake of the whole world. In this, neither the power nor will of God is at all clear, but hidden, *sub contrario*.

The first part of the text describes the impact of what was about to happen to Jesus on the “great number of the people [who] followed him” (Luke 23:27a). Poignantly pointed out “were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him” (Luke 23:27b). Jesus’ response was ironic; tears shed, laments uttered, ought not be for *him* but for *them*; “For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23: 31).

I’ve wondered about the wailing in this text, in part because of its explicit

presence in the text as a response by those surrounding Jesus as he is crucified, and in part because of what it could mean for how we engage this text in our preaching this week. It would be a mistake to hear “wailing” as “whining,” but rather as genuine lament born simultaneously out of a profound sense of despair in what is happening before them, and an equally profound sense of hope that God will *do something* in the midst of this absolute train wreck of a situation. Lament doesn’t have a clear sense of *what* God *will* do, but only that God will be faithful—somehow.

I wonder about the plausibility of constructing our homiletic expressions as an occasion for inviting people to join in the lament of the wailing women (and others), both for what is happening to Jesus in the text, and for what is happening in our midst today.¹² It may seem an odd way to celebrate Christ the King. The image itself conveys confidence; lament seems so—*whiny*—to people who try like hell to cover up what is really going on in their lives.

Yet, there is nothing that evinces more confidence in Christ as King than to lament. It is interesting to note that this gospel text that elicits lament is paired with the very psalm from which Luther drew inspiration to write *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. It could be argued, perhaps, that Luther’s Reformation discovery of justification by faith alone was born out of lament.¹³ Lament is that liminal space

12. See Sally A. Brown, “When Lament Shapes the Sermon,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 27–37.

13. See Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther*; Vitor Westhelle, “Justification as Death and Gift,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24/4 (2010),

in which one cries out to God in despair and hope precisely *because* God promises to be faithful.¹⁴

Allowing lament to not only be the *subject* but also, in a deeper sense, the *form and substance* of one's sermon is risky business. Just as Jesus, in the text before us, "calls a thing what it actually is," as Luther described in the Heidelberg Disputations (1518), so, too, is the preacher called on to do the same. Some will take this as an opportunity to be prophetic, in the sense that they think they are called on to call people, systems, and institutions out.

Yet, one could also ask the question: Where are people crying out in our world, communities, and congregations? The question may seem futile, but the more one opens oneself to it, cries of pain are found all over the place. As I write this, the Boston Marathon bombings and tornados that have ravaged Oklahoma are in focus. One could justifiably cry out against protocols that allowed such bombings to take place. In both instances, one could also cry out against God.

Yet the force of a sermon that uses lament in both form and substance would not only cry out in pain, anguish, fear, and despair; it would also, equally so, turn the hearer's attention to the cry of hope that comes from our faith in a

God who raises Jesus from the dead and is in the business of showing up in the midst of hopeless situations and turning things upside down. This cry of hope is neither blind nor naïve; rather, it trusts the promise that in all things, Jesus Christ is with us to the very end. (Matt. 28:20) PL

Thanksgiving November 28, 2013

Psalms 100

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Philippians 4:4–9

John 6:25–35

The "I AM" statements in John's gospel replace the need for a text of transfiguration. They echo back to God's revelation at the burning bush in Exodus 3. They not only suggest something about *Jesus*, but also about his *followers*, and, indeed, the *world* around the disciples past, present, and future.¹⁵

But on this occasion of Thanksgiving, is this text *good* news to those who gather hungering and thirsting for it—for both the turkey and stuffing as much as for the good news that has no end? The scandal of Jesus' exchange in this text is in the final verse—at least when looking at it both from the context of the feasts to which many will sit down on Thanksgiving Day *and* from the reality that, in fact, some *are* hungry—when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whomever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

249–262; Paul Lutter, "Lament: Where Two Realities Collide," *The Lutheran* March, 2010, pp. 32–33; and Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification* Geoffrey Bromiley, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). Luther describes his so-called reformation discovery in *LW* 34.336–337.

14. See Oswald Bayer, "Toward a Theology of Lament," Matthias Gockel, trans., in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*. David M. Whitford, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 211–220.

15. This insight is not a new one. See, for instance, Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Or, maybe a better question is whether or not this is good news for *everyone*? I'm thinking of those for whom actual physical hunger and thirst are not only daily realities, but become the central focus of their lives. Or how about those for whom homelessness and poverty prevent them from celebrating the holiday that is almost celebrated for its focus on gluttony and possession of material things?

John's gospel is *not* synoptic in many ways, not just one; yet, one of them is that we see less sociopolitical or economic concern than we do in the other three. At least this seems true in first encountering what good news John proclaims.

It is noteworthy to point out that neither this text, nor even this verse, is imperative-driven. Even when those gathered ask the explicit question, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" the answer is not imperative, but indicative. "This is the work of God [not the work of humans, well intentioned though they may be], that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:28–29).

Yet, that Jesus is bread for "whoever comes to me," and "whoever believes in me" may mean something *other* than making a personal decision for Jesus Christ. A friend of mine is fond of saying that when Jesus comes into our lives, he brings others with him; I would add that one doesn't get to decide on the guest list. So "whoever comes to me," and "whoever believes in me," is more than a personal matter; it is public in its concern for the *ways* one "comes to" and "believes in" Jesus Christ.

Jesus seems to be telling them that while it is *God* who works to bring us to Jesus and believe in him, it is through those whom they encounter that such

revelatory work is done. Since Jesus is the bread of life, then the disciples are those who are hungering and thirsting for such nourishment. Yet this bread does not fall from the sky, as manna (John 6:31). Those gathered mistook what happened as Moses' work and not God's, yet, "it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven" (John 6:32).

While it was, indeed, God who provided bread from heaven in the form of manna for the people of Israel, it is also God who provides bread from heaven for us in our encounters with others whose lives reveal to us just how hungry and thirsty *we* are for the bread that Jesus brings. Could it be the case that the way we are fed and nourished is precisely through encounters with the very lives of those whom this text seems, at first glance, to exclude or marginalize?

This will *not* be something that those gathered to celebrate Thanksgiving want to hear, no doubt. Yet, when did Jesus ever check the Nielsen ratings before judging whether he should proclaim what needed to be said?

As we gather as an assembly to celebrate Thanksgiving, perhaps preachers could help people realize that the hunger and thirst they sense is not just for traditional Thanksgiving Day foods. Where will they find the kind of nourishment that lasts: centrally in the word and sacraments, yes, but also, in the community both gathered and scattered.

For in the Thanksgiving feast which has no end, those gathered will *not* only be those whom we care about; they will include those for whom we have been given opportunity to care for—and those whom God has given to care for us. PL



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