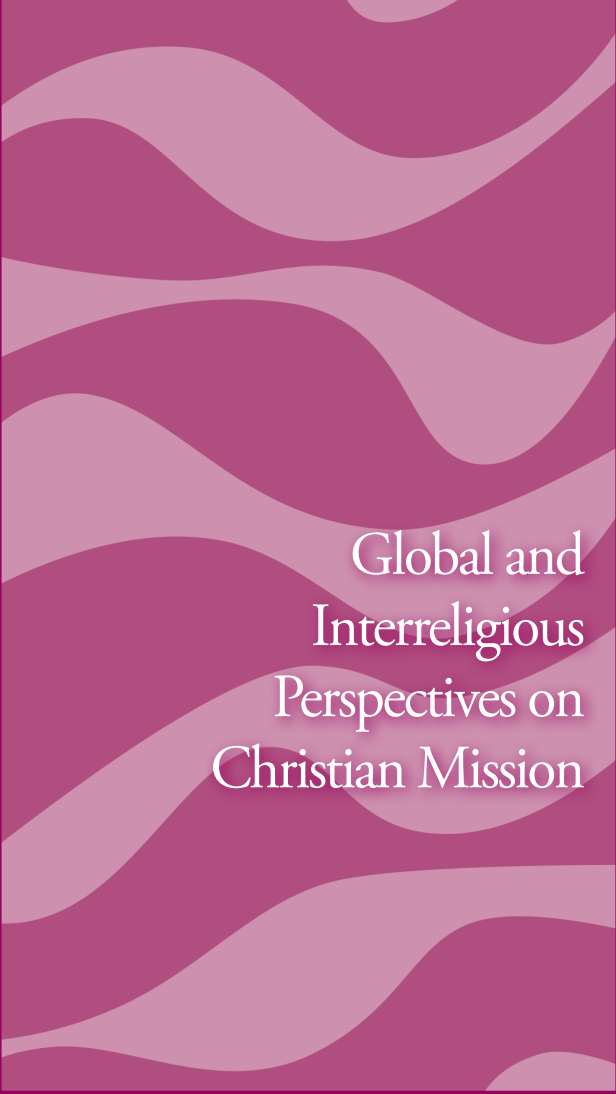


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Global and
Interreligious
Perspectives on
Christian Mission

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Global and Interreligious Perspectives on Christian Mission

The April 2013 issue focuses on the mission of the Christian church in the 21st century from the perspective of those examining the meaning of faith and mission from diverse global or interreligious perspectives. Philip Jenkins has written compellingly about “the new face of Christianity” arising through the growth of and evangelization by the churches in the global south (*The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford University Press, 2006). The churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, once dependent on the west through the missionary movements of the last centuries, now are contributing in unprecedented ways to the vitality of the global Christian movement. Simultaneously, many churches of the global north find themselves struggling to rediscover what it means to become a “missional church” in contexts where the establishment of Christianity as the favored religion of the culture has rapidly disintegrated.

Diana Eck has documented as well the degree to which the United States has become “the world’s most religiously diverse nation” (*A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002). We no longer have to travel to other continents in order to encounter those from the other great religions of the world. Followers of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other world religions live in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods all across the U.S. Church leaders are now challenged to approach other faiths generously, with openness to learning from interfaith relationships through mutually transforming dialogue. How can we engage both Christians from the global south and people of faith from other religious traditions in ways that are both authentic to our own centeredness in Jesus Christ and open to developing life-giving relationships through interfaith encounters?

Mark W. Thomsen challenges readers to expand their theological horizons to envision how Christian faith can be re-conceptualized beyond exclusivist approaches to embrace the truth that Jesus Christ is already alive and working throughout the world, also among those who are followers of other religious traditions. This lead article addresses some specific questions about the character of Christian faith posed by Christian believers who ask whether our theology of the religions has become too narrow and confining. The author shares a lifetime of wrestling with these interfaith questions in this provocative and stimulating article.

What is the meaning of the death of Jesus on the cross for the ministry of reconciliation between Christians and people of other faiths? **Craig L. Nesson** draws from the thought of René Girard and Girard's theory about the scapegoat mechanism to argue that the cross puts an end to all violence that turns religious others into sacrificial victims. Girard's interpretation of the cross has implications for interfaith relations, including with Muslims, for whom the meaning of the cross has often been a stumbling block in interreligious dialogue. The article includes proposals for the practice of peacemaking according to the way of Jesus Christ and his cross.

Justin E. Eller makes a challenging case for the imperative of contextualizing Lutheran theology and doctrine with cross-cultural awareness and integrity, lest theology and doctrine function as "indoctrination" rather than as liberating contributions to a receiving culture. Drawing upon specific examples from Bolivia, the author cites Luther's own writing to outline an alternative hermeneutic for fostering resonance in cross-cultural theological interpretation. The method of accompaniment, through respecting the insights and the intellectual capacity of those in the receiving culture, has significant implications also for retranslating and reinterpreting core theological teachings.

The legacy of Lesslie Newbigin continues to bear fruit for interreligious dialogue in the contemporary world. **Man-hei Yip** engages the thought of Newbigin regarding the contributions and limits of his thought for understanding the meaning of truth in a pluralistic world. At issue is not the question about whether there is religious truth but rather: "How is truth understood in different contextual situations?" In the pluralistic Asian context, the Gospel is not only an assertion of faith but a lived experience, requiring that truth be interpreted in diversified terms. A Christ-centered theology embraces the voices of others, allowing for mutual enrichment between epistemologies and in missiological praxis.

Hubert M. Watson provides a portrait of the theological educator and the task of theological education from the perspective of India. The vocation of theological educators is "the creative response of committed persons to the discernment of a divine call to be engaged in the ministry of equipping the people for God's mission and ministry." The author underscores the importance not only of academic commitment but also pastoral and spiritual commitment, in order to provide credibility to the person and work of the theological educator. There are significant implications from this argument also for the vocation of theological educators in our North American context.

The twentieth anniversary of independence in Namibia was the occasion for the final two articles in this issue. **Ralston Deffenbaugh** draws upon both research and personal experience as legal advisor to the Lutheran bishops of

Namibia to recollect the conditions of oppression in Namibia under the regime of apartheid imposed by South Africa and the work of advocacy set loose in the United States through the influence of the Shejavalu family, during their time of study at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa in the 1970s. The author stresses the impact made by North American Christians through their concerted and organized efforts in political advocacy as a powerful contributing factor for Namibian freedom in 1990. **Sue Moline Larson** provides a sermon, based on Luke 4:14-21, to give thanks to God for the miracle of Namibian freedom and to further document the work of advocates in the United States. The Namibian Concerns Network responded in solidarity to the needs of this distant African country, beginning with personal friendships with a single family, whose testimony about the desperate conditions of their people led to “release to the captives” and “let the oppressed go free.”

Craig L. Nesson

Editor

Expanding the Scope of God's Grace: Christian Perspectives and Values for Interfaith Relations

Mark W. Thomsen

Director of World/Global Mission in the ALC and ELCA, 1982–1996

Director of PhD/ThM Studies at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1996–2006

Questions and Challenges

Within the Christian community there are many who are skeptical about expanding our understanding of God's grace. Some are convinced that the expansion of God's grace is a modern perversion of traditional Christianity. There is only one truth, one way. Others are convinced that contemporary thought makes all religious values relative to a particular time and place. There are many truths, many ways.

We propose that the affirmation of Jesus as the truth and the way trusts that God's grace is neither locked up in the faith of Judaism nor confined within Jesus' message and mission. It is Jesus himself who declares that God is universally present and active in the world. This is my proposal for addressing from a theological perspective what I call "the Jesus vision." This vision is grounded in three "Jesus values": love of the enemy, recognition of God's universal presence and action, and the power of God's reign embodied in Jesus and manifest through vulnerable, non-coercive love.

In order to address a variety of Christian questions and visions concerning religious pluralism, I will address a variety of Christian individuals. For example, I am addressing Jack and Robert. Jack and Robert are two individuals with whom I

have recently talked. They both grew up in conservative Reformation churches—Lutheran and Reformed. During a recent breakfast, Jack said he had been struggling with a question: "How can I say that Jesus is Lord, the Way, the Truth and the Life and still respect people of other faiths?" His traditional faith seemed to exclude Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews from the presence and activity of God. On another evening Robert had even deeper questions and was angry with the God of his confirmation class instruction: "How could the church possibly condemn everyone outside the Christian family?" Since he no longer believed that the church represented God or truth, he would rather not have anything to do with the church.

To both Jack and Robert I suggested that if we would seriously listen to the Jesus of the Gospel traditions, we would see that Jesus insisted that God is present and active to transform and save the world *outside* Jesus' ministry as well as *through* Jesus' ministry. An acknowledgment of God's work outside the Christian vision and church is neither a contemporary innovation nor a revision of orthodoxy. Rather, this message goes back both to the New Testament story of Jesus and to traditions in the Hebrew Bible. This vision has relevance for our interfaith conversation.

At the same time there is a younger generation of post-modernists who are very open to a multiplicity of truths and who question any affirmations of an "ultimate truth." While teaching in Chicago at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, I had many students who came from a variety of pluralistic perspectives. They were Catholic, Unitarian-Universalist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and others. Suzanne represents this perspective, which can be illustrated by the story from India of several blind men describing an elephant. One holds the tail and says an elephant is like a rope. Another explores the leg and describes the elephant as a tree. Still another feels the trunk encircling his body and says the elephant is like a snake. A wise man then suggests that the elephant is a mystery to the blind men. Only by sharing their limited experiences can they begin to explore all which they have encountered.

God, the ultimate mystery, is only partially grasped by peoples of particular faiths. Each faith community has a particular but limited vision of the ultimate reality in which we live, move, and have our being. Interfaith conversations lead to spiritual enrichment as we share our visions of God and our shared life together. However, there is one troubling question: Within our common search for God, in whom and where and how do we find life and hope right now? When our foundations shake, when stars fall and galaxies disintegrate, in whom or what do we trust?

I want to suggest to Suzanne and those like her that it remains insightful to return to Jesus and the early Jesus community. Jesus saw God alive and active outside his own community and ministry. However, he also announced the coming of God's reign within his own message and mission. I want to suggest to Suzanne that even as we are enriched by Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, we are also grasped by the Jesus

vision that trusts in the ultimate Abba/Mother, who is passionately involved in the world, encompassing both the joys and brokenness of our lives. The most recent interfaith studies stress the particularity and uniqueness of every faith tradition and propose that each tradition search the depths of its own perspectives for ultimate vision and values that may transform our shared life.

From the Jesus tradition we are grasped by the promise that in a broken world permeated by tears and suffering, we can trust in God's creative, forgiving, and transforming love, as God shares our suffering and participates in our struggles for compassion and righteousness. God eternally embraces all creation and all humanity, even though we may be totally unaware of that affirmation, acceptance, and forgiveness. This vision of divine love as concretized in Jesus is central to what Christians can bring to interfaith conversation to share as God's truth, even as we are also recipients of other visions of God's truth.

As we continue our common journey with the Muslim community of 1.5 billion people in the world, it is essential that we also talk to our Christian sisters and brothers whom we will name Esther and Jacob. They are convinced that the biblical prophets—Ezekiel, Daniel, John of Patmos, and Paul—speak not only to biblical times and places but also to historical events of the twenty-first century. Through their understanding of prophecy, they are convinced that God is moving history to a climactic conclusion. In their eyes the state of Israel and the United States of America are central to that eschatological plan of God. Esther and Jacob believe that the followers of Jesus are called to ally themselves with the state of Israel in order to be blessed by God and promote the return of Jesus

Christ. As the ancient Israelites drove the Canaanites from Palestine to create the original kingdom of David and Solomon, so Christians now are called to support the new Israel as they once again drive from the land of Palestine those opposed to a new Israeli Jewish state.

Esther and Jacob believe they not only are called to support Israel but also to oppose the enemies of Israel who are often Muslim peoples. Today Muslim-Christian relations are intimately related to the Palestinian/Israeli crisis. Esther and Jacob need to rethink the meaning of Jesus in their lives. Jesus did not support those who fought for an independent state of Judah. In contrast to holy wars of Yahweh, as described in some traditions of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus called his followers to the nonviolent struggle of compassion, love, and truth. Jesus' disciples were not called to hang people on crosses as did the Roman military machine. Rather, they were called to carry crosses and be themselves hung on crosses for the sake of the kingdom of God. Jesus wept over Jerusalem as his contemporaries insisted that rebellion against Rome was God's path; they dreamed of a Maccabean revival. Jesus warned that they had chosen political disaster, the total destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, together with the exile of her people.

As Esther and Jacob ponder the meaning of Jesus, they also will realize that they must discover a new understanding of prophecy. Jesus and his gospel forced the early Christians to reject the popular prophetic eschatology of Jesus' contemporaries. A few years after Jesus was crucified, Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem and Christians fled the doomed city. They abandoned all dreams of holy war against the Roman Empire. They fled the vision of a Messianic David figure, which would restore the glory of ancient

Israel in the name of Yahweh. Instead of a conquering Messiah, the followers of Jesus read the prophets and discovered the suffering servant Messiah of Isaiah 53. This was the prophetic dream that spoke of a crucified Messiah. For the early Christians, the crucified Jesus took the place of the conquering king or a Judas, the Hammer, Maccabeus. From the perspective of Jesus and the apostles, the heresy of the "Left Behind" series is that it once again crucifies Jesus as the Suffering Servant to resurrect a political Messiah and an imperial Jewish state.

Exploring the Depth and Breadth of God's Grace

As resources to the interfaith dialogue, we now turn to two primary motifs which are found within the Jesus story of the Gospels. These two themes challenge Christians to participate more fully in enriching interfaith relationships:

1. Exploring the Expanse of God's Grace to Embrace All Creation and All Humanity

This first theme emphasizes that God's radical love is so wide and deep that it crosses all boundaries and divisions to embrace all creation and all humanity. Divisions between race, nationality, class, wealth, and power are bridged and all humanity is embraced by the love of God. In love God searches for all humanity in order to give us life.

The most destructive division is the line we draw between "us" and "them," friend and enemy. Even this wide chasm has been crossed by the gracious, forgiving God. This "love of enemy" theme is powerfully articulated in the ancient prophetic book of Jonah. Jonah lived at the time of the Assyrian Empire (eighth century BCE), centered in Nineveh in the land today known as Iraq. It was the most powerful

empire in the Middle East and known for its cruelty. If a city rebelled against the armies of Assyria, that city's walls were torn down, all males were killed, and their heads were piled at the city gate. Women and children were taken into exile. Assyrian armies had destroyed cities in Israel and Judah. The Jewish people hated Nineveh and Jonah the prophet hated Nineveh!

Incredibly, God calls Jonah to proclaim God's message of compassion, repentance, and forgiveness to this nation that terrorized Jonah's people. As soon as Jonah heard God's call to Nineveh, he raced in the opposite direction across the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah, however, soon found himself thrown by sailors into the sea and in the belly of a gigantic beast. Once again God speaks: "Jonah, will you reconsider your call?" Finally, Jonah goes and preaches; the city repents and Jonah is furious. He sulks under a vine and once again God speaks: "Jonah, do you have a problem?"

Then we learn why Jonah sought escape by ship and wanted no part of God's mission. We thought he was terrified by Nineveh's evil power. But no! Jonah is terrified by the expanse of the grace and love of God. "I knew," says Jonah, "that you were a merciful, forgiving God and that your love even reached out to embrace our enemy" (cf. Jonah 4:2). In effect Jonah says: "I want no part of your disgusting grace. This love of the enemy is nothing but a deplorable weakness. God, why don't you take a stand and bring fire down on these people?"

God replies: "Jonah, do you not realize that there are 120 thousand people here who don't know their right hand from their left? Furthermore Jonah, there are thousands of cattle here which I do not want butchered." This radical love, proclaimed in an ancient book to an ancient people who dreamed of holy war, comes to fulsome expression in Jesus' message and

mission. Jesus' ministry takes place when another powerful and destructive empire occupies the land of Palestine. Taxes are oppressive; political liberty has been crushed; people long for freedom. In order to drive out the hated Romans, freedom fighters attack from the wilderness. In response to this revolutionary impulse Jesus preaches, "Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you so that your love might be as perfect as the love of God" (cf. Matt 25:43–58). Jesus preached that the reign of God was approaching and permeating life. But God's coming into the world has nothing to do with the violence of freedom fighters or the crushing power of Judean armies. Jesus' followers were called to struggle for justice and peace, yet without military or police power. In contrast to tanks and guns, the reign of God preached and lived by Jesus comes through compassionate service, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and binding up the wounds of victims. His prophetic word called for the sanctimonious, religious elite to repent of their self-righteous hypocrisy, and for the secular, accommodating priests to repent of their corruption of the faith. Jesus called for a struggle of love by those willing to die for the lives of another. Moreover, this was to be a joyous venture, characterized by reconciliation, healing, and sumptuous inclusive banquets. Inconceivably, the way of Jesus even entailed giving the enemy a breather on a hot day! If a Roman soldier asked you to carry his luggage for a mile (which was the legal limit), one could say: "Have a good day, chap. I'll go with you too" (Matt 5:41).

Like the prophet Jonah, most Judeans thought Jesus' reign of God was a joke. Prior to the crucifixion, the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate, released the Judean terrorist Barabbas rather than the Jesus who had announced a radically different liberation (Luke 23:18). Jesus persisted in

following the will of the God whom he knew as Abba. In the end he assembled no army and called for no military resistance. He was crucified by the Roman military machine and prayed for those who drove spikes into his hands and feet: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

This vision inspires the Jesus people to action. This message is to be shared and preached when family relations crumble or nations go to war. This is the message that Christians are called to live and proclaim, whenever humanity is gathered and divided by race, nationality, religion, culture, or conflict. We are called to participate in a radical love that has no boundaries, no limits, and no enemies. There are only one people and one God, who in powerful forgiving and transforming love embraces all people and the entire universe.

What totally confounded and transformed the early disciples was their own encounter with this unconditional grace and forgiveness, when they too were the enemies of God. Forgiveness was not just for those who "know not what they do." It even included them when they knew exactly what they had done. They had once been the enemies of God. Peter was haunted by the crowing of the cock after he had denied Jesus three times. He was overwhelmed by a love that continued to call him to feed Jesus' sheep. When he was crucified for Jesus' sake, he asked only to be hung upside down. Paul never forgot that he had been loved, forgiven, and called while cursing Jesus and destroying Jesus people. His utter amazement is expressed in a letter written years later: "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). This same incredible grace permeated the message and mission of Jesus. The parable of the two sons still confounds listeners. Is such love possible? In spite of the prodigal's disavowal, betrayal, disobe-

dience, and debauchery, he was welcomed into the arms of unconditional forgiveness, astounding grace. It was not the fear of hell and damnation that obsessed the early church; it was the amazing grace experienced even in spite of human denials and betrayals that transformed the world (Luke 22:61).

Christians have often denied and betrayed this Jesus vision and made a mockery of our faith. The Jewish com-

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munity for centuries has experienced death and violence at the hands of Christians. Muslims experienced the violence of Christian crusaders, who wept with joy at the slaughter of Muslim people as Jerusalem was wrenched from the hands of the Muslim rule. Asians experienced the imposition of western Christendom as a dimension of violent western colonial expansion. I will always remember a sign posted in a small park in the Shanghai harbor: "No Dogs or Chinese Allowed." The Chinese Communists had left it there as testimony to the Christian colonialists, who sailed under flags marked by the sign

of the cross. Many Christians want to mention that Christians also have experienced persecution. However, this does not excuse the many occasions when we have betrayed God and Jesus by becoming instruments of hate and violence rather than sacrificing, forgiving love.

2. Exploring God's Grace at Work within All Creation and All Humanity

The second basic theme from the Jesus narrative is powerfully portrayed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The first motif centered on the conviction that God's radical, forgiving, transforming love embraces all creation, all humanity, crossing the gaping chasm between "us" and "them." This second motif asserts that God not only embraces in love and forgiveness the whole of creation and all humanity but that God

works in love within and through them as well as us. Even as God works like leaven in a loaf of bread, salt within the soup, or light permeating the darkness, so God's truth comes to expression quietly and mysteriously in every people, every culture, and every religion. Glimpses of transcendent truth, revelatory glimpses of life, and footprints of the divine are everywhere.

In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), Jesus is confronted by a legal expert with the question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks: "What has been written in the law?" The lawyer replied with a formal, legal answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus answered: "You are right. Do this and you will live." Still the lawyer was not satisfied and continued: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus next explains with the parable.

A man was traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road quickly descended from mountain country to the Jordan River valley and at times was dangerous. Bandits attacked the traveler, stripped him of his possessions, and left him near death by the side of the road. A temple priest, a Jew of good standing, was returning home after serving his time in the Jerusalem temple. He saw the beaten man but took no risks, passing by on the other side of the road. Likewise a Levite, a Jew of good standing belonging to the priestly tribe, also passed him by the other side. Finally, a Samaritan, a despised foreigner, had compassion on him, caring enough for this wounded man to stop and take a risk. He applied medication of wine and soothing oil, bound up the wounds, put him on his own donkey, carried him to a local inn, cared for him, paid the bill, and promised the innkeeper to cover future expenses. Jesus then asked: "Who proved to be neighbor to the man who was robbed

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and beaten?" The lawyer replied: "The one who showed mercy." Jesus concluded, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus did not answer the question: "Who is my neighbor?" Instead, Jesus says that the law calls you to become a neighbor, show mercy, and have compassion. That is the meaning of participation in the radical love of God.

Yet there is an even more radical vision in this parable. Jesus chose to identify the merciful one as a Samaritan. Samaritans were reviled, hated by the Jewish people. They were considered heretics, reading the Law of Moses as scripture but worshipping in Samaria rather than in Jerusalem. They were accused of having an invalid priesthood and only traces of Jewish blood. They were a mixed race: part Syrian, Assyrian, and Babylonian, part Jewish. For the orthodox Jews they were the enemy, unclean, and socially unacceptable.

In telling the story from the Samaritan perspective, Jesus claims that God is present and active outside the Jewish community. God is even present and active in the Samaritan "enemy," those considered heretics, members of an inferior faith. Here the despised and ridiculed Samaritan embodies the compassion and mercy expressed in God's law. This pluralistic vision was not an unusual view for Jesus. Jesus saw authentic faith in a Roman centurion (Luke 7:1–10). Jesus saw the care of a widow in the unbelieving city of Sidon for God's prophet Elijah (Luke 4:25ff.). Jesus told a parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25 that encompasses the judgment of all nations: "I was hungry and you fed me; thirsty and you gave me a drink." The judge of all nations concludes: "In as much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me."

The division between those who are received or not received by the judge of the universe is not based on a distinction

between the nations of God and nations of evil; nor is the judgment between those who follow Jesus and those who follow other faiths, such as the teachings of Buddha or the Quran of Islam. In Jesus' parable there is a difference between sheep and goats. It is a separation between those who demonstrate divine compassion and those who resist or fail to demonstrate divine compassion. The question is whether we have surrendered ourselves to God, trusted in God's radical compassion, and lived in the spirit of divine mercy, grace, forgiveness, creative care, and passionate concern for others. Openness to mercy and compassion is participation in the divine life.

In the Good Samaritan story Jesus asserts that the reality of God's compassion and grace is loose in the world. It is shockingly alive. Trusting in divine compassion is participation in that which is more powerful than death. The story of Jesus' resurrection proclaims that when life seems to disintegrate and evil appears to crush truth, righteousness, and love, *we can continue to trust that the God of incomprehensible grace is the word of truth!*

Grace Today and in This Place

Recalling Jack and Robert, who had questions originating from their early instruction in the Christian faith, Jack was convinced that there must be some way to confess Jesus as Lord and still respect the life and faith of his Muslim and Hindu friends. However, he did not know whether he could legitimately do this as a Lutheran and still be faithful to the gospel. Robert thinks that his confirmation instruction was so wrong-headed that he left his church and became a questioning agnostic. Following the logic of this article, we would need to say to both of them that if Christians really take the Jesus of the Gospels seriously, we would conclude that Jesus does not agree

with their confirmation instruction. Jesus did not say that outside the church and outside the preaching of the gospel there is no forgiveness of sin. Jesus trusted that the God, whom he named "Our Father" and the source of gracious forgiveness, was not locked up in a narrow Jesus box.

For Jesus incomprehensible grace, forgiveness, and mercy is the cleansing ocean in which all of humanity swims. In Jesus' parable of the last judgment neither the sheep nor the goats perceived that they had met the Lord in the personhood of their suffering, lonely, excluded, oppressed and neglected neighbors. None of them knew they were swimming each and every day in the waters of suffering love. Furthermore, each one had been embraced by God's cosmic compassion, both sheep and goats. This may appear incomprehensible, but the same God incarnate in Jesus wept over the same Jerusalem that within a week crucified him.

There is nothing that any of us can do to create the conditions for such unfathomable depths of unconditional grace. We simply live within a love that will not let us go. Jesus' parable declares that if while swimming in the creating, cleansing, and compassionate depths of grace you despise or ridicule those things which sustain and nurture life, then you do not have to swim in these waters. Yet finally you discover that apart from this ocean of compassion and grace there is no life. We can say to Jack and Robert that we trust that our Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist friends swim in the same ocean and we desire to share this incredible vision of life with them. An affirmation of God's universal presence is not a form of modernism, nor is it a denial of the Lordship of Jesus. It is an acknowledgment of Jesus' own faith, which fulfilled ancient hopes, as found in books like Jonah.

When Christians acknowledge Jesus as the way and the truth, we acknowledge that

God is fully present and active in Jesus. We trust that what we see and hear in Jesus is God's truth and we find here the foundation of our lives. In Jesus we are at the same time called to a radically new vision for God's sake to open our eyes and see what God is doing outside our own faith community.

When Jesus opens our eyes to the breadth and depth of God's grace, we should not be surprised that the Hindu prophet and saint, Mahatma Gandhi, understood the depths of God's nonviolent activity in the world more fully than most of us who call ourselves Christians. When Jesus opens our eyes, we should not be surprised to have our eyes opened to see a multitude of good Samaritans, who are bringing the compassion of God into life and community.

Let me share a few personal experiences where I was surprised by grace, even when I should not have been surprised. Approximately thirty years ago I was in Cairo, Egypt. Dr. Harold Vogelaar was working there, introducing me to his work and relationships. Toward the end of the day we visited an old Cairo mosque led by a gentle, elderly Imam. Through Harold's translation, I asked him how he used his week. The Imam said that he spent much of the week visiting and talking with those attending the mosque. He talked to them about their struggles and the prevalence of poverty. He said one of his greatest challenges was getting the wealthy to share more generously with the poor. He spoke about the youth who found it difficult to find work and the temptations they faced in the market place. Videos and literature filled with sex and violence from Europe and the U.S.A. threatened to undermine their moral values. I asked him: "What do you preach about on Friday, the day of the sermon?" He replied: "I read the Quran and I look for a message of hope. In our world, where life is so often broken,

people need hope.” As we left, the Imam asked if we would request our Christian friends to pray for his brother-in-law, who was extremely ill and needed the prayers of God’s people.

The depths of the Imam’s spiritual life and commitment to God and God’s people opened my eyes to the reality of God loose in the world, a God who shatters our traditional boxes of orthodoxy, the God both Jack and Robert were longing for.

I thank a Muslim friend, Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi, with whom I taught at the Lutheran School of Theology for many years. About twenty years ago I taught my first class with Dr. Aasi, dealing with Muslim-Christian relations. It was an evening class and we were both commuting, so we shared a meal before class. Dr. Aasi’s wife, Zubaida, often sent the delicious food we shared. We often began with a moment of silent prayer. One evening Dr. Aasi asked whether instead of praying separately we begin by praying together. That was a surprising moment of grace.

Experiences with the Cairo Imam, Dr. Aasi, and many others no doubt have led me to read my scriptures differently. My understanding of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan has grown out of interfaith conversations and relationships. I had missed the depths of Jesus’ vision of the reign of God. I had missed that Jesus has told us to open our eyes and see. My God is alive and active even among those for whom we may have suspicion or designate the enemy.

This does not mean that our faith traditions are identical or our theologies the same. But it does mean that we can recognize common motifs that bind us together with the entire human family. Recently 138 distinguished Muslim scholars from around the world sent a message to Christians and Jews titled “A

Common Word Between Us and You.”¹

They proposed that our common life together, beginning with our shared belief in one God, could be seen in two basic themes: 1) Love of God and 2) Love of Neighbor. Several Christian communities have responded positively to this Muslim initiative. The response has not been a matter of full agreement, but rather that there are values and perspectives within our traditions which can lead to creative dialogue and common visions, which transcend our differences and make our global life enriching for all humanity.

Let us now come back to Suzanne and those who have few or no questions concerning a multiplicity of truths. For most post-modernists it is taken for granted that all religions are on different paths in the search of an ultimate mystery. The story of the various blind men examining the mysterious elephant rings true to them. In most recent discussions concerning religious pluralism there has been recognition that each vision has particular and unique perspectives. Each of us is challenged to explore the depths of our own tradition for treasures of truth that have universal value for our common life together and insight into ultimate reality, the reality in which we all live and move and have our being. With Suzanne we are each seeking for the depths of God’s truth. It is also true for the Christian family that within the Jesus story of the Gospels there emerges the conviction that the mystery within and behind the universe is a God of unconditional forgiving, caring love—a love that embraces all humanity—friend and enemy.

Traversing our journey toward this mystery, the Jesus vision is like a Global

1. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington, eds., *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 28–50.

Positioning System (GPS). Let's call the Jesus vision a "Galactic Identification System." Within a cosmos of billions of galaxies, we trust in the promise about from whence we come, to whom we belong, and for whom we live. No matter how mysterious or terrifying our life experiences may be, we are invited into the depths of a life together where we can trust that God's grace, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness make us whole. Along this journey we hear the promise of Jesus as a gift: "Open your eyes and see what else I am doing in the world!"

Finally, I wish to speak to Esther and Jacob, who have been captured by one of the great heresies of the contemporary church, as popularly portrayed in the "Left Behind" series. If they are willing to reread the Jesus story, they will discover that according to Jesus the coming of the reign of God occurs through vulnerable, nonviolent love and compassion. The coming of God's reign was visible in the life and mission of Jesus. It came through prophetic words of truth that exposed the hypocrisy of Jesus' contemporaries; it came in works of comfort and hope that offered forgiveness and future to those who believed they had been damned by God. It came through acts of mercy that healed the sick and made the blind to see; it came through joyous banquets with outcasts and those despised by the cultured and rich. It came as Jesus prophetically challenged the sale of sacrificial animals in the temple. It came through an infinite love that aimed to remove suffering from the world by bearing the pain of all creation, the cost of fulfilling the prophetic mission of God. It came through a forgiveness that sought the transformation into friends of the enemies who threatened the very life of Jesus.

Jesus did not advocate violence either to fulfill the will of God or to create an independent Israel through rebellion against Rome. Instead Jesus said: "Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute

you; do good to those who despise you" (cf. Matt 6:44). We are not called to be the prophets of end-times holy wars, but are called to be a community of servants, surrendering our lives to Jesus as non-violent, vulnerable instruments of peace in the world. How does this relate to Christian-Muslim relations? Twenty-five years ago in Cairo, Dr. Chelery, executive for the Muslim Mission to the World, asked Harold Vogelaar and me: "How can you speak of better Christian-Muslim relations when the Christian countries have stolen our homeland, given it to the Israelis and today still support the destruction of the Palestinian people?" Roland Miller has responded well: "Perhaps Muslims will be willing to listen to us when Christians are willing to die for them."

An authentic Jesus community is found in the occupied territory on the West Bank of the Jordan River. They are a small Christian minority, threatened daily by the Israeli occupation. They see American Christian Zionism not only as heresy but as a threat both to their very existence as Palestinian Christians and to their Muslim neighbors. Within the chaos and tragedy of continual violence they believe they are called by Jesus to a nonviolent struggle grounded in compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace. In the words of Mitri Raheb of Bethlehem: "Our struggle is through love to transform our Israeli opposition into our friends." This is what the Jesus vision is all about. Palestinian Christians, united with Jewish people opposed to militant Zionism and working together with Muslims committed to a nonviolent jihad for peace, seek to transform our world of hatred and oppression into a world in which God's compassion flows forth as forgiveness, mercy, and justice!²

2. This article originated in a presentation made at Carthage College and Wartburg Theological Seminary.

The Cross as Foundation for the Ministry of Reconciliation: Ending Violence in Our Endangered Globe

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From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us *the ministry of reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting *the ministry of reconciliation* to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16–21
(emphasis added)

We live in an age of endemic violence: domestic violence in the home, violent crime on the streets, terrorist violence against innocents, and military violence between nations. In many instances people and nations would resort to violence as the first response in dealing with serious

disputes. In the United States, there is a deeply ingrained and widely disseminated “myth of redemptive violence” that sees violence as the first resort for addressing intractable conflicts.¹

In a violent world, where do Christians locate themselves in relationship to the Prince of Peace who proclaimed, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5:9) and “Love your enemies” (Matt 5:44)? Dare we believe that the cross of Jesus Christ is sufficient to accomplish the reconciliation which Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5? Can the cross really make a difference in relationship to the political, socio-economic, and interreligious conflicts faced by the church and society in our time?

Atonement in the Bible

While the New Testament is emphatic about the significance of the cross for God’s work of salvation, some voices in contemporary theology articulate skepticism about the usefulness of the cross for

1. Walter Wink, “Facing the Myth of Redemptive Violence,” *Ekklesia*, <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/content/cpt/article_060823wink.shtml> February 15, 2012.

dealing with the problem of violence in our world. For example, some critics see nothing redemptive about the suffering of an innocent man on the cross, rejecting sacrificial atonement as a kind of “divine child abuse” by the Father against the Son.² In other quarters of New Testament research, primary attention has been devoted to a recovery of the teachings of Jesus apart from a coherent interpretation of his death and resurrection. Furthermore, the meaning of the cross is radically contested by Muslim interpretations that in principle do not allow for the death of God’s Son on the cross. To set aside the centrality of the cross, however, eviscerates the central event in God’s mission to the world as testified in the New Testament (Col 1:19–20). How can the church reclaim the significance of the cross for the ministry of reconciliation in our violent age?

Recall the multiple metaphors employed to describe the work of atonement in the Bible and, specifically, the meaning of the cross in the New Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, atonement referred to the removal of guilt by the ritual action of sacrifice.³ On the Day of Atonement, for example, two goats were involved in the ritual removal of sin from the people (Leviticus 16). One goat was sacrificed and the other driven into the wilderness. The sacrificed goat worked atonement by the sprinkling of blood. By laying hands upon the head of the other goat, the priest transferred the people’s iniquity to the scapegoat before it was driven into the wilderness.

2. Cf. Joanne C. Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1989) and Lawrence Swaim, “Christianity without the Cross? The Death of Christianity,” *Tikkun* 27(Fall 2012):20–27.

3. Cf. Christian Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

The New Testament gives rise to atonement thinking as the early Christian writers sought to articulate the meaning of Jesus’ death. In one of the earliest formulas, Paul wrote: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3). Depending on the writer, context, and audience, the cross is variously interpreted in the New Testament as sacrifice (Rom 5:8–9, Heb 2:17), redemption (Eph 1:7, 1 Pet 1:18–19), victory over evil powers (John 12:31–32, Col 2:14–15), revelation (John 3:16, Mk 15:39), and reconciliation (Rom 5:10, Col 1:20). The experience of God’s power through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ comes to expression through a variety of images and metaphors, which are like different facets on the face of a single diamond, each contributing to its sparkling beauty. Here we explore one of these facets, the significance of the cross for the ministry of reconciliation.

Girard and the Scapegoat Mechanism

One of the most fascinating interpreters of the cross, articulating its implications for peacemaking and the ministry of reconciliation, is René Girard. Girard began his career as an interpreter of literature, ancient mythology, and ethnography, teaching in France and the United States. What fascinated Girard in the literature, stories, and cultures he investigated was how one particular pattern repeated itself over and over again. This pattern involved the identification, blaming, and violence against a particular victim. Over his career, Girard developed an elaborate theory about the human propensity for scapegoating violence as one of the most characteristic of all human activities. In elaborating the meaning of the cross for the ministry of reconciliation in a violent world, this article draws upon the work of Girard to argue that the church,

in obedience to the cross, must serve as an agent for peace and reconciliation in our contemporary society and world.

Girard explores at length how human beings inevitably engage in the behavior of imitation. For example, children learn how to speak and how to act by imitating others. The entire process of human socialization within a particular culture involves an elaborate and comprehensive process of imitation, what Girard calls *mimesis*. Mimesis pervades human existence, even among adults. Advertising, for example, cleverly instills mimetic desire into human hearts and minds to form them as consumers, so they will desire and buy particular goods and services. As a pertinent instance, when I mention to my students a particular author or book that I find significant, many of them also will begin to desire to read or own this book. Imitation or mimesis is so omnipresent in human life that we scarcely recognize how pervasively it influences our behavior.

In itself mimesis is not a problem for human existence. Mimesis is natural and inevitable. An acute problem arises, however, in that mimesis regularly degenerates into competition and rivalry between individuals and groups. For example, whenever there is a scarcity of resources (say, water or land), it is predictable that those dependent on these resources begin to compete and become rivals for these limited resources, a scenario that is manifest across the globe. In the case of children, for example, competition and rivalry easily devolve into which of them is the best at playing a particular game. In the case of adult society, men easily become competitors and rivals for the affection of a particular woman—an example that is all too common in many different cultures and tragically resulting in violence.⁴ Even in the church there

emerges competition and rivalry for certain proposals, jobs, calls, or positions, resulting in bitter conflict. Also between religions, for example Christianity and Islam, members of these faith traditions become swept up into rivalry and become competitors for success in influencing the population and society. While mimesis is a natural and inevitable aspect of human existence, it easily degenerates into competition and rivalry, leading to anxiety and tension among the contesting parties and affecting human community.

The next step in Girard's theory involves "the scapegoat mechanism." How do individuals and groups inevitably deal with the anxiety and tension that emerges from mimetic rivalry? There is one predictable occurrence. Individuals and groups identify someone to blame for their problems. After a really difficult day, one goes home and vents frustration against a child or a spouse. In the church, particular members become identified as those who are the cause of all the problems. Often the identified scapegoat is a person or group which does not easily assimilate into the larger society. This could be a non-conformist of some kind. Or, it could be those who are easily singled out as different from the majority, identifiable by color, ethnicity, class, language, culture, beliefs, or some other readily recognizable characteristic. Families sometimes identify a particular family member to blame for their problems. Churches begin to focus on an internal or an external enemy. Societies focus on those who do not or choose not to fit in to the cultural norms. Nations identify other nations as part of an "evil empire."

In a further complication to Girard's scapegoat theory, those who identify a person or group as responsible for their problems in every instance maintain the deep and abiding conviction that they are entirely justified in singling out the scape-

4. John Archer, "Power and Male Violence," in John Archer, ed., *Male Violence*

(New York: Routledge, 1994).

goat as blameworthy. The accusers always assert that the scapegoat is only receiving what he/she/they deserve(s). The fact that they are repeating the ancient mechanism of scapegoating is hidden from their awareness. They remain absolutely convinced that they are fully justified and righteous in carrying out their accusations, blame, exclusion, and ultimately violence against the identified scapegoat. Scapegoats are understood as having brought the trouble upon themselves. Decent society is only giving them what they deserve based on their behavior and differentness.

Once a society executes scapegoating against the identified victim (whether an individual or group), the accumulated tension and anxiety of that society is released—at least for a period of time. In this sense, scapegoating discharges the buildup of social angst and desire for vengeance. Scapegoating relieves collective tension. A kind of purification takes place. However, scapegoating only eases the anxiety for a limited period of time. All too soon, new anxieties and tensions once more begin to mount. Once again there emerges the need to identify new scapegoats, who in due time also will need to be eliminated for the good of the group or society. This cycle repeats itself endlessly, a story as old as the history of the world.⁵

Girard documents the scapegoating mechanism with reference to countless instances in ancient mythology, literature, and cultural anthropology.⁶ He goes so far as to claim that all religions and every human culture originate through the ritual practice of scapegoating, by means of various forms of sacrifice, including primordi-

ally the practice of human sacrifice. Over the generations, however, the truth about human sacrifice and scapegoating become masked as the story is handed down. A figure that once functioned as scapegoat typically becomes valorized in later narratives as a hero or even a god. Human societies are knit closely together by their mutual participation in the identification, blaming, and eradication of scapegoats. Social bonding occurs in a profound way among those who have conspired, even unaware, to eliminate an enemy of society from their midst.

The Crucifixion of Jesus and the End of Scapegoating

What makes Girard's work so significant for theology and the life of the church and its ministry of reconciliation is his analysis of the New Testament, in particular his interpretation of the Christian Passion narratives. Girard's own return to active profession of Christian faith took place as a result of his discovery in the Gospels of the unambiguous disclosure of the scapegoat mechanism for what it truly is: the identification, execution, elimination, and death of an innocent victim. The crucifixion of Jesus transpired as a consequence of mimetic rivalry—jealousy and fear among those who defined him as a danger and enemy to the people. Unlike other cultural or religious narratives, however, in the Gospel narrative, Jesus is consistently affirmed as entirely innocent. In fact, the Christian story maintains that Jesus “knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21). The Christian account from beginning to end contends that Jesus did not deserve what he received, grave mistreatment and death on the cross. In human terms, the Gospel narratives expose the crucifixion as the consequence of unjustified suspicion, resentment, and sin against Jesus. Jesus

5. Cf. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

6. René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

did not get what he deserved. He was wrongly accused, blamed, condemned, and executed.

Girard maintains that *for the first time in human history* the truthfulness of the Christian Passion stories fully reveal the scapegoat mechanism for what it is. Because of this insight and its significance for unmasking the universal scapegoat mechanism, Girard returned to the Christian faith. Thereby his career shifted from analyzing the phenomenon of scapegoating in human societies to the criticism and overcoming of the reality of sacred violence with reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. One might describe Girard's foundational insight in this way: Of all people on earth, Christians are those called to recognize and name scapegoating for what it is, in order that it might cease to have its mystifying power over us. Christians are those who ought to know better than to identify and project blame on ever new scapegoats. Christians are those people on earth who, for Jesus' sake, are called to announce a prophetic "No!" against every situation where tension and anxiety are spiraling out of control, before they lead to the execution and elimination of new scapegoats.

This understanding of the cross summons the church of Jesus Christ to a profound vocation in a world of violence. Because Jesus Christ died to be the final scapegoat, Christians are called to resist the phenomenon of scapegoating violence in all its guises. What human authorities and the mob intended for evil—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—God turns upside down. God allowed Jesus to act as the final scapegoat, in order that our proclivity for scapegoating might be exposed for all to see and thereby be unmasked and undone. For Jesus' sake, let there be no more scapegoats!

What are the implications for the church of Jesus Christ in its ministry of

reconciliation? It means we must remain vigilant in all situations of human conflict that normally and inevitably would degenerate into enmity through the contagion of mimetic rivalry. It means the church must sound a warning whenever threats of violence escalate against an identified scapegoat as the victim. It means that the church keeps reminding itself that Jesus Christ died to be the final scapegoat, whenever it would engage internally in scapegoating behaviors against members of its own community. And it means that the church is called to serve as an advocate in society for curbing the mania of mimetic rivalry, competition, and threats of scapegoating violence wherever it threatens to erupt. God on the cross made Jesus to be sin, the innocent victim of human scapegoating, in order that by his death the Christian church becomes the righteousness of God in the world. We are the righteousness of God in the world through our resistance to the allure of scapegoating violence against others, serving God's way of peacemaking and reconciliation.

Interreligious and Societal Implications of the Ministry of Reconciliation

One of the most tense and potentially violent encounters in our world today involves interreligious relationships between Christians and Muslims. I will address the topic of Christian-Muslim relations in general terms, primarily informed by the context in the United States. It will be important to interpret these themes in light of the possibilities and limitations of other contexts. There are vast differences in the character of the encounter between Muslims and Christians in the different contexts where these faith communities live in close proximity to one another. For example, apart from large

urban areas, many Christians in the U.S. have very limited familiarity with Muslim people or beliefs. Much of the information about Islam in the public media tends to accentuate the fears of people about the more militant forms of Islam.

Across the globe increasing attention is being devoted to the imperative of interreligious dialogue. There are many resources (for example, from The Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, and the Roman Catholic Church) that can guide the practices of interfaith encounter. One helpful heuristic for thinking about interreligious dialogue has been formulated by Leonard Swidler, who differentiates between three forms of possible interaction: the dialogue of the head, the dialogue of the heart, and the dialogue of the hands.⁷ In the dialogue of the head, the primary focus is on a discussion of ideas and beliefs. It involves effort to understand what others believe and how they interpret the world religiously. Improved understanding aims to comprehend the religious reasoning that informs why the partner comes to conclusions that may be quite different from one's own. Two central themes—the meaning of the Trinity and the meaning of the cross of Jesus—are among the most difficult topics for discussion between Muslims and Christians according to a dialogue of the head.

The dialogue of the heart shifts the focus to the particular religious practices of the partner. Here there is an exchange of experiences about prayer, worship, and religious rituals. The goal involves learning to encounter and appreciate the spiritual practices expressing joy, hope,

sorrow, gratitude, anger, and love in the spiritual life of the other religion. Here one mutually encounters and learns about the religious practices of another's traditions: the sacred writings, stories, poetry, music, dance, painting, architecture, and other expressions of the heart. This path leads us deeply into the core spiritual convictions of another faith. This dialogue of the heart discloses the experiences of the ultimate as they come to expression in another religious tradition.

Third, we approach one another through the dialogue of the hands. Through the dialogue of the hands we search for common ground in working together to promote human well-being and the flourishing of all creation. We search for ways to cooperate together in securing the reconciliation necessary to live together without violence, promoting the common good. Because we are so interconnected with one another in the contemporary world, we imagine ways to make this world our common home. The world around us is in urgent need of healing. People of faith, working together with all people of good will, contribute to the process of healing by cooperating together in life-giving projects.

Promoting the Dialogue of the Hands

In face of the crises testing human and planetary survival—violence, poverty, environmental degradation, disregard for human rights—it is imperative that people of different faith communities—including Muslims and Christians—identify shared ethical commitments and promote cooperative strategies to foster the survival, if not the thriving, of earth and its inhabitants. In this regard, the initiatives of Hans Küng and colleagues in the Global Ethic project (in conjunction with the Parliament of the World's Religions)

7. Leonard Swidler, "Understanding Dialogue," in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grassroots*, ed. Rebecca Kratz Mays (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2008), 9–11.

deserve focused attention by Christians as they engage in interfaith relations. The Declaration toward a Global Ethic asserts that there can be no world peace without peace among the religions.

To further the cause of peace and the ministry of reconciliation, representatives of the world's major religious traditions formulated and announced the Declaration toward a Global Ethic at the Parliament of the World's Religions in September 1993 as a statement of intent to strive together in affirming the fundamental principles of a common ethic:

We are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole, and so we have respect for the community of living beings, for people, animals, and plants, and for the preservation of the Earth, the air, water and soil....

We must treat others as we wish others to treat us. We make a commitment to respect life and dignity, individuality and diversity, so that every person is treated humanely, without exception.... No person should ever be considered or treated as a second-class citizen, or be exploited in any way whatsoever....

We commit ourselves to a culture of non-violence, respect, justice, and peace. We shall not oppress, injure, torture, or kill other human beings, forsaking violence as a means of settling differences....

We must strive for a just social and economic order, in which everyone has an equal chance to reach full potential as a human being.... We must move beyond the dominance of greed for power, prestige, money, and consumption to make a just and peaceful world....⁸

8. Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum,

This Declaration corresponds to a four-fold agenda for the social ministry of the church: 1) the work of reconciliation and peacemaking, 2) engagement in social justice, 3) care for creation, and 4) profound respect for human dignity.⁹

Hans Küng makes clear that the Global Ethic project is not about "a new global ideology, or even an attempt to arrive at one uniform religion."¹⁰ Rather, it aims to make known what religions in West and East, North and South already hold in common, but so often becomes obscured by "dogmatic" disputes and intolerable self-opinionatedness. The Declaration toward a Global Ethic seeks to articulate a consensus ethic about those things absolutely necessary for human survival. It is not directed against anyone, but invites all—believers and also non-believers—to adopt these ethical principles and abide by them.¹¹ The focus is on mutual cooperation among members of the world religions and all people of good will toward a common ethical agenda that comes from forging consensus positions among a wide spectrum of faiths and belief systems.¹²

As a way forward in interreligious relations, representatives of the world religions—including those from Islam and Christianity—are encouraged to enter future dialogue focusing especially on "the dialogue of the hands," exploring to what

1993), 14–15.

9. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

10. Hans Küng, ed., *Yes to a Global Ethic*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1996), 2.

11. Ibid.

12. Cf. J. Kirk Boyd, *2048: Humanity's Agreement to Live Together. The International Movement for Enforceable Human Rights* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010).

degree particular ethical commitments are held in common, in particular the commitments to peacemaking, social justice, care for the earth, and defending human dignity.¹³ This interfaith process could resemble the consensual process modeled by the World Council of Churches in seeking greater unity among different Christian church bodies. Representatives of the world religions might engage in dialogue around the following questions:

1. To what extent can your religious tradition recognize in these four ethical commitments an authentic expression of its own convictions?
2. What consequences can your religious tradition draw from these four ethical commitments for its relations with people of other religious faiths, particularly with those who also recognize these commitments as expressions of their authentic faith?
3. What guidance can your religious tradition take from these four ethical commitments for its religious rituals, educational practices, ethical commitments, and spiritual witness?
4. What is the religious rationale, based on your core convictions, that leads to your agreement or disagreement with these four ethical commitments?¹⁴

By engaging in this approach, interreli-

13. This proposal is consistent with the proposal for making the Great Commandment the basis for Muslim-Christian understanding in Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington, eds., *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

14. The first three questions are adaptations of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), x.

gious dialogue can give priority to exploring the religious convictions that undergird common ethical practices, instead of beginning with doctrines or beliefs (the dialogue of the head) that lead to gridlock and impasse. Interreligious dialogue of the hands can be both substantive regarding the flourishing of life in this world and consequently lead to the search for common religious ground.¹⁵

Christian Practices that Make for Peace

What core Christian practices guide the life of the church in serving as an agent of God's ministry of reconciliation in the world?¹⁶

First, the church engages fervently in the *practice of praying for peace*. This practice is deeply embedded in liturgies from ancient times to the present. The church prays for peace at worship:

For the *peace from above*, and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord.

For the *peace of the whole world*, for the well-being of the church of God, and for the *unity of all*, let us pray to the Lord.

The assembly responds, "Lord, have mercy." Note the profound connection between the coming of God's peace and the unity of all people expressed in the *Kyrie*, reflecting the way of peace as the path to oneness. In the intercessions of the church, we implore God not only for peace in general, but we pray for peace specifically in those conflicted places where hatred and violence rage. The prayers give

15. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, "After the Deconstruction of Christendom: Toward a Theological Paradigm for the Global Era," *Mission Studies* 18, No. 1-35(2001):78-96.

16. This section is based on and adapted from Nessan, *Shalom Church*, 77-82.

occasion to historical remembrance (for example, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by nuclear attack, the genocide in Rwanda, or the Holocaust), begging God: “Never again!” The significance of prayer in the life of the church should not be underestimated. There is a real sense that we become that for which we pray. In the liturgical prayers we rehearse the things that make for peace, trusting God to form and shape the body of Christ as a people of reconciliation. Moreover, the church’s leaders encourage the people of God to make prayers for peace a regular part of their devotional lives.

Second, the church is called to the *practice of interpreting the actions of others in the kindest way*. In explaining the meaning of the Eighth Commandment (“You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor”), Martin Luther wrote that we are not only to avoid betraying or slandering our neighbors, destroying their reputations, but “we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”¹⁷ The seeds of human violence are often sown through the use of language to demean and degrade others. It is commonplace to describe others in terms that rob them of their humanity, especially as we react to provocations that threaten our own well-being. Once we begin to interpret the actions of others by using language that fails to acknowledge another’s fundamental personhood, however, the door is opened for the rationalizing our own vindictive responses. The use of epithets or stereotypes to label others is the first step in the spiral of violence, as “they” are objectified

and dehumanized. Acts of violence against vulnerable groups (usually minorities) normally begins with hate speech that constructs a world in which others are, at the very least, devalued, dehumanized, and eventually turned into monsters.¹⁸ Such language, either on the personal or societal scale, regularly degenerates into justifying acts of retribution. Once others have been dehumanized by our speech, all things against them become possible. The body of Christ is summoned to speak charitably about others, interpreting their actions in the best possible way. The choice to do so counteracts spirals of violence, not only in the church but in society.

Third, God in Christ teaches the church the *practice of forgiving*. This practice is ritualized in the church’s order of confession and absolution—public and private. In one form, the absolution declares: “God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.”¹⁹ The ritual of confession and absolution makes real one of the central features of the Christian gospel: the forgiveness of sins. What is more, the church at worship models the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation whenever it participates in the passing of the peace. The passing of the peace is an ancient Christian practice: “Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ” (1 Pet 5:16). The passing of the peace embodies through the liturgy God’s desire that we live together in God’s shalom. The liturgy

17. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, trans. Timothy J. Wengert, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 353.

18. David Livingstone, *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 103–131.

19. “Confession and Forgiveness,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 96.

forms the church in the practice of peace and forgiveness as the way of life willed by God for the life of the world.

Members of the church sometimes find it notoriously difficult to live together in peace, forgiving one another as we have been forgiven. Only as the body of Christ immerses itself in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ established on the cross does it become free to live in patience and longsuffering, genuinely forgiving those who have offended us. The practice of forgiveness is not merely a ritual recited at the beginning of worship. Forgiveness is one of the most needful practices in all of human life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's wisdom about marriage is wisdom for all relationships:

In a word, live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship...can survive. Don't insist on your rights, don't blame each other, don't judge or condemn each other, don't find fault with each other, but accept each other as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.²⁰

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer elaborated the practice of forgiveness, encouraging private confession and absolution as essential to the very survival of Christian community.²¹ Only as the body of Christ practices forgiveness among its own membership, trusting profoundly that Christ has first forgiven us, can it act authentically as an agent of reconciliation not only in a violent society but also in the midst of interfaith

relations. For this reason, it is crucial for the church to be diligent both in practicing the rite of confession and forgiveness in its liturgical life and deliberate in working consequentially at the skills of conflict resolution.²² Otherwise, the world will see reflected in the church only more of the same animosity it already knows too well. The hypocrisy of the church regarding the practice of forgiveness limits its effectiveness as a witness to peace and reconciliation in society.

Fourth, the church must learn *the practice of resisting violence*. One of the primary expressions of human violence involves scapegoating others. Human beings are equipped with an aggressive impulse that is easily aroused in response to a perceived threat.²³ This aggression can quickly run out of control, unless it is checked either by internal or external regulation. One of the chief religious sanctions to control outbreaks of human violence is the practice of forgiveness. We learn to resist the violent impulse of the heart by focusing on how much we have been forgiven by God in Christ, redirecting us from our impulse to revenge and retaliation.

The reality of group violence, however, is a challenge of another scale. As anxiety builds up in a community or even a nation, the inclination to identify and exact violence against a scapegoat (either an individual or group) becomes virtually irresistible. Based on the penetrating insight of Girard into how the scapegoat pattern has been unmasked through the Christian passion narratives (that is, ac-

20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 46.

21. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together! Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 108–118.

22. Norma Cook Everist, *Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

23. Cf. A.K. Turner, "Primate Aggression," in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Evolution*, ed. Steve Jones, Robert Martin, and David Pilbeam (New York: Bantam, 1992).

knowledging that Jesus died on the cross as an innocent victim), the church has the distinctive vocation to resist the pattern of scapegoating violence wherever it threatens to occur. Whereas in virtually all historical instances, those perpetrating violence believe themselves to be righteous and justified in scapegoating the victim(s), Christians are called to unveil and name scapegoating for what it is, the displacement of collective anxiety through violence against the designated victim. This insight about the nature of the cross and atonement in Jesus Christ is key to resisting all scapegoating violence.

The instances of the scapegoat mechanism in our world are too many to list. The impulse toward scapegoating violence finds its victims in child abuse, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, rape, gang violence, school shootings, criminal activities, police retaliation, violent behavior in prisons, capital punishment, state-sanctioned military initiatives, torture, genocide, and war, among many other examples.²⁴ While all violence may not be the consequence of scapegoating, much of it is and more than has ever been acknowledged. Due to the human propensity for scapegoating violence, it is imperative that the body of Christ, bearing the marks of the Crucified One, raise a clear and unambiguous protest against all forms of scapegoating violence, while posing critical questions about the fundamental validity of violence in addressing human conflict.

24. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

Fifth, the church engages *in the practice of advocating nonviolence*. For many people, this is a bold and risky venture, because it dramatically challenges the prevailing social conventions about the necessity and validity of violence. Social ideology is supported by the myth of redemptive violence. According to this myth, violence is indispensable for solving conflict: only violence can save us, only war brings peace, only "might makes right."²⁵ Because the myth of redemptive violence is so deeply embedded in the public consciousness, those who advocate nonviolence are often viewed as naïve and dreamers. Yet, as Gandhi, King, Tutu, and many other witnesses demonstrate, non-violent resistance is an extremely effective means for accomplishing social change.²⁶ Much work remains to be accomplished before the church as the body of Christ is equipped to embrace, advocate, and practice nonviolent resistance. More than ever before in human history, the church needs to become, by the power of Christ's cross, a community which fosters, strategizes, and implements nonviolent alternatives in a world of spiraling violence, including violence motivated by interreligious conflict.²⁷

25. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 42–62.

26. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategy of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

27. A version of this article first appeared in *Regional Issues in Globalization: A Theological Assessment*. *Glaube und Denken*. Special issue (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012): 297–310. It appears here with permission.

Post-Indoctrination: Teaching Lutheran Doctrine in a Mission Context

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Missional Lutheran churches continue asking what it means to be Lutheran in their particular contexts and what Lutheran doctrines have to say to them in these contexts. If the doctrines and confessions do not engage the contexts in which they are being read and applied, then they are irrelevant as far as the particular contexts are concerned. Lutheran doctrines and confessions are not repetitive formulas that can be applied in every context; rather, they must be translated and reinterpreted in order for them to become relevant and accessible for critical reflection, examination, praxis, and most especially action.

The traditional Lutheran hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” sounds like a strangely disconnected funeral dirge when sung in Spanish to the beat of a single drum in the highlands of Bolivia. Even though it is sung by every Bolivian Lutheran, even in the indigenous Aymara language, it is out of context and there is an unspoken recognition that this classic hymn is foreign. As traditionally Lutheran as this hymn might be, it is a sign of importation. The majority of Bolivian Lutherans have never seen a castle-like fortress other than from photographs or on the Internet. Former president of the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Humberto Ramos Salazar, wrote about the early hymnals used in the Bolivian Lutheran Church: “the first one has greater

theological principles and spans significant confessional ground, however it fails to incarnate in the life of the Aymara. The famous hymn of Martin Luther, ‘A Mighty Fortress is our God,’ with profound theological and historical meaning, what could it say to an Aymara? Neither the rhythm nor the lyric will arrive at its profound sense of religiosity. We are sure that for a German, who is familiar with the history of the Reformation and the geographical context, it will mean a lot.”¹

Despite being sung every year to celebrate Reformation Day, there is a constant underlying rumble of suspicion and questioning. In many Lutheran mission contexts, including Bolivia, one encounters a variety of perplexing and complicated questions as to why the national church is Lutheran and where the church traces its confessional roots. Not only did the early Lutheran missionaries to Bolivia in the late 1930s bring the word of God, they also brought the patriarchal colonizing missionary enterprise that imposed hymns, denied traditional indigenous dress and musical instruments, and created a deep sense of dependency on foreign Lutheran churches in the area of financial sustainability as well as in

1. Humberto Ramos Salazar, *Hacia una Teología Aymara* (La Paz: CTP-CMI, 1997), 100 (own translation).

the areas of Lutheran theological and confessional identity. Similar to Ramos, one Bolivian Lutheran pastor, reflecting on the tumultuous history of the foreign missionizing presence asserted: "It is a sin that they come in without knowledge of or being acquainted with our reality, without at least the ability to speak our language. And then they want to teach us so many things! It is a continual invasion that we Aymara suffer."²

The biblical and Lutheran indoctrination experienced by many in the Bolivian Lutheran Church resulted in the constant call for others, typically foreigners, to define them, construct their Lutheran identity for them, and continue indoctrinating them with their Lutheran teachings. Teaching Lutheran doctrine in a mission context is not, nor should it ever be, domesticating indoctrination. In this article, I explore what teaching Lutheran doctrines in a mission context means and entails by looking at how Lutherans in mission contexts³ could regard Luther and his teachings as inspirational, the impacts of translating and retranslating the Lutheran doctrinal statements and

confessions into the contextual realities, and the development of a contextualized Lutheran identity through *coram doctrina*.

Opposing Indoctrination: How Lutherans Could Regard Luther

Indoctrination, as opposed to education, is commonly understood as inculcating doctrines in authoritative ways that expect the indoctrinated person not to question or critically reflect on the subject or underlying motive of the indoctrinator. If the motive is to subordinate or acculturate the faithful masses in order to maintain the historical practices within the church, then the result will be domestication through indoctrination, which dehumanizes the learners in order to serve the purposes of the hegemony or church hierarchy.⁴ If the motive is to liberate learners through their own understanding of the cross of Christ, in order for them to live into the fullness of their universal priesthood, then the result will be liberation through education.

It is possible to teach Lutheran doctrines without indoctrinating when the catechisms, principle articles of faith, and confessions are intentionally separated from the rote repetition and memorization of articles and doctrines that may be completely divorced from the context and world of personal experience. Brazilian Lutheran theologian, Vítor Westhelle notes that our identity as Lutherans does not lie in laudatory proficiency in reciting articles from the Augsburg Confession, but in our willingness to be vulnerable.⁵ This is to say that in order for confessional educa-

2. Xavier Albó. "The Aymara Religious Experience" in Manuel M. Marzal, et al., *The Indian Face of God in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 154.

3. Vítor Westhelle. "Transfiguring Lutheranism: Being Lutheran in New Contexts" in Karen L. Bloomquist, ed. *Identity, Survival, and Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2008), 11. "...new contexts' are not traditionally Lutheran contexts, and definitely not the context in which Martin Luther lived and theologized 500 years ago. 'New contexts' are those in which Lutheranism and Luther himself were adopted centuries after the birth of the Reformation in distant lands to the south and east of his birthplace." What Westhelle calls "new contexts," I call mission contexts.

4. Anza Lema. *Pedagogical and Theological Presuppositions of Education* (Hong Kong: Lutheran Southeast Asia Christian Education Curriculum Committee, 1977), 70.

5. Westhelle (2008), 23.

tion to be liberating, one must take into account the historical context of Luther, his contributions, and opinions, while at the same time not being limited by them.

When Lutheran doctrines are accepted without question and they fail to engage the context in which they are being interpreted, then they are irrelevant as far as that particular context is concerned. Historically, Lutheran theologians and

The Lutheran doctrines that speak from the sixteenth century evangelical movement may be used as models and inspiration, but should not serve as domesticating indoctrination.

churches from the North Atlantic region have controlled the Lutheran hermeneutic and how one defines a “traditional” Lutheran identity. Even though many of Luther’s most influential works now exist in Spanish, the indigenous Aymara-speaking Lutherans in Bolivia still find it difficult to construct their own Lutheran identity, asking what it means to be Lutheran in their context and what Luther and Lutheran doctrines can say to them.

In his sermon on “How Christians Should Regard Moses,”⁶ Luther himself offers a rough guide for how Lutherans in mission contexts could regard him and, even more broadly, Lutheran doctrines. In reference to how Moses (that is, the Hebrew Bible) does not bind the Gentiles by pointing to the pretext, text, and context of the Exodus story (adding that God never led the Gentiles out of Egypt, only the Jews), Luther goes on to state: “We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver... therefore it is clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles.”⁷ Following this notion of Luther, Lutherans in mission contexts will recognize that while the early Lutheran reformers may be regarded as foundational teachers, theologians, and preachers of Lutheran doctrines for sixteenth century Germany, they may not be regarded as doctrine-givers for the twenty-first century Bolivian Aymara *campesino*.

The Lutheran doctrines that speak from the sixteenth century evangelical movement may be used as models and inspiration, but should not serve as domesticating indoctrination. One should be free to follow Lutheran doctrines as a way of seeking out God’s liberating justification and grace through the cross in their own context and lived experiences.⁸ Lutherans in mission contexts accept Lutheran doctrines and articles of faith, not because Luther or Melancthon wrote them, but because they are based on scripture as the

6. LW 35:161–174. The German title is “Ein Unterrichtung, wie sich die Christen in Moses sollen schicken” WA 16. 363.

7. Martin Luther. “How Christians Should Regard Moses” in Timothy F. Lull, ed. *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 139.

8. Ibid., 140.

chief authority.⁹ While the doctrines of the church have come from various sources in various ways over various times, it is imperative that Lutherans today not only examine whether the doctrines are sound and point to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but also, as Luther said, “look to see to whom it was spoken, and whether it fits us.”¹⁰

Retranslating Lutheran Doctrines in Mission Contexts

The applicability or resonance¹¹ of Lutheran doctrines has to do with whether they are relevant to the contextual reality. Doctrinal application begs the question: Can in fact Lutheran churches in the global South, having been impacted by the North Atlantic missionary enterprises and historically denigrated by hegemonic regimes of truth, construct their own Lutheran identity in context without discussing, interpreting, or even challenging the doctrines themselves? Before doctrines can be contextually relevant and their meanings understood, they must be accessible in the original languages of the local church.

Lutheran doctrines and even Luther himself must be translated and retranslated, interpreted and reinterpreted in every context for every generation by authentic interpreters and translators who risk being traitors of traditions through their critical

reflection and examination. Authentic doctrinal translation is more complex than the mere rendering of words in another language, for it betrays tradition as it attempts to translate concepts, meanings, and logics in new ways. Lutherans are not justified through blind adherence to traditionally interpreted articles of faith. If a Lutheran church does not have the Lutheran doctrines or articles of faith affordably accessible in its own language and logic, how can the church explore the contextual relevance and resonance of these doctrines, much less critically examine them in order to accept or reject them?

The Reformation shifted the balance of interpretation from the grips of powerful bishops and theologians and opened the canon to varying interpretations. Our understandings of God, scripture, and church are all part of the heritage and traditions that were passed down from those who came before us. Yet heritage and tradition are not to be accepted uncritically. Indigenous Lutherans should be allowed and encouraged to read and reread the Lutheran confessions and doctrines from their particular contexts, in order to test their relevance and applicability and so that an indigenous confessional or doctrinal hermeneutics may be born.¹² As Ramos might ask, how can God be a mighty fortress when all we have in the rural Bolivian highland are simple adobe houses? Who then is God for us? Challenging traditions or heritages imported by foreigners is itself a liberating tradition that disentangles the mechanisms of power structures and fundamentally equalizes the liberating power of the priesthood of all believers. By virtue of baptism, all Lutherans possess the power to test and judge what is right and wrong in matters

9. Günther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix. *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 49.

10. Luther, 144.

11. Vitor Westhelle. “Exploring Effective Context: Luther’s Contextual Hermeneutics” (September 2011), 7. “This is resonance: the text speaks to my situation.”

12. Confessional or doctrinal hermeneutics concerns the study of the interpretation of confessions or doctrines.

of faith¹³ as well as what is relevant and irrelevant in matters of Lutheran confessional identity.

Developing a Contextualized Lutheran Identity through *Coram-Relationships*

Even though Lutheran doctrines have been imported through missionary movements, the question remains: What does it mean to be Lutheran in the mission context? Is this constant searching the result of inconsistency in confessional education and theological formation? Or, is it a form of resistance unto survival, knowing that previous foreign missionary presences had subjugated and destroyed culture, languages, and autochthonous identity through indoctrination? Perhaps we must ask whether this request is arising from the historical practice through which the traditionally powerful define and represent, perhaps even misrepresent, those without traditional Lutheran power.

To develop a contextualized Lutheran identity as a sense of being and existence, Luther's insights into *coram*-relationships may prove useful. Gerhard Ebeling summarizes Luther's notion of the *coram*-relationship that defines a thing not in relationship to itself but in its outward relationship with something else or, more properly, in terms of relationship of something else with it.¹⁴ In order to develop its contextual identity, a Lutheran church body does well to take up and adapt Luther's common usage of *coram*-relationships. For example, whenever two people encounter one another

and really see each other, they are then present to the other and their existence is determined by that of the other. Ebeling goes on to assert that the most important element in the relationship, as implied by the Latin preposition *coram*, "is not the way in which someone else is present before me, in my sight, but the way that I myself am before someone else and exist in the sight of someone else, so that my existential life is affected."¹⁵

This brings us back to the point of developing a contextualized Lutheran identity. Through the liberating practices of education and the teaching of Lutheran doctrines, a Lutheran church body's existential life and contextual identity are affected by being held in the sight of the Lutheran doctrines—not in a compulsory or oppressive way but in a way that is liberating and challenging. This is a kind of *coram doctrina*: existence in the sight of the doctrines and within the vision of the doctrines. Just as Luther could not disregard being held in the sight of the cross, neither can Lutherans disregard being held and impacted in the sight of the relevant translated doctrines.

For a Lutheran church in a mission context to fully engage and be its own agent of change in the construction of a contextual identity, the relationship between the church and its teachings is essential. This relationship does not need the intervention of others from the exterior, in order for it to be explained or given value. Such a relationship can only begin when both parties in the relationship are accessible and understandable to the other. Otherwise both are held captive in the sight of the other with little to say, like two foreigners who speak two distinct languages with different worldviews. How those in a Lutheran church body interpret Lutheran doctrines and articles of faith and

13. LW 44:135.

14. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 194.

15. *Ibid.*, 196.

how they develop their own contextualized Lutheran identity is their own task and responsibility that should not be done by any other. There may be room to listen, advise, and challenge when invited, but the development of a contextual Lutheran identity is the primary responsibility of the local Lutheran church itself and its own *coram doctrina*. Once the church's *coram doctrina* relationship has been established, then its contextualized identity takes shape and influences practical theologies, functional ecclesiologies, and confessional hermeneutics.

Conclusion

The Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church will have entered a period of post-indoctrination when the contextualization of Lutheran doctrines is encouraged and supported as a means of liberating education, in order for its members to build their own Lutheran identity in context. From the plethora of what Luther and the early reformers have contributed, that which is meaningful, relevant, and liberating are the pieces that must be lifted up and studied. Without critical examination, questioning, and indigenous application, there is little hope that the translated doctrines will prove relevant and useful, much less foundational.

If the objective of teaching Lutheran doctrines in a mission context is walking together in God's mission to explore and converse with the Lutheran doctrines and articles of faith, then retranslation and reinterpretation for contextualization and resonance is key. Teaching the doctrines in a mission context is itself a form of accompaniment, not walking ahead or

behind, but alongside.¹⁶ Not only time but a new paradigm shift away from previous missionizing methods of indoctrination is required for this type of doctrinal accompaniment to occur. Indigenous Lutheran sisters and brothers have the wisdom and capacities to authentically engage Lutheran doctrines from their own cultural, linguistic, and logical perspectives without the ecclesiastical hegemony crying heresy or syncretism.¹⁷

The pretext for the Lutheran Reformation movement was to liberate the church of Christ from the grip of authoritarianism and elitism by the sixteenth century Roman papacy and curia. The texts of the confessions and doctrines of the Reformation grew out of that movement and have been passed down as tradition, either as historical inheritance or foreign importation. The mission contexts of the Lutheran church require that the confessional texts and church doctrines be questioned and contextualized again and again in every new context. Teaching Lutheran doctrines in a mission context should not be reduced to the indoctrination of a-contextualized and irrelevant doctrines. Instead we must strive and struggle to see that freshly translated doctrines, relevant and accessible to the local Lutheran context, emerge through the agency of those who risk freely constructing their own Lutheran identity in a post-indoctrination era.

16. Division for Global Mission, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century* (Chicago: ELCA, 1999), 13.

17. Westhelle (2008), 12.

Truth in a Pluralistic World: A Dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin

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“That Britain is a plural society is a fact that no one can deny.”¹ As a prominent leader and theologian in church’s mission, Newbigin’s critique of pluralism in British society had resonance throughout the world. First, his attack on pluralism with its cognates of paganism and relativism results in the mission of re-evangelizing the West. Having assumed the role as the Gospel herald for centuries, the West renders the Gospel truth to the scrutiny of a scientific worldview. Truth is relativized to the extent that Newbigin believes the West, too, has become a mission field.

Second, Newbigin’s critique of pluralism inevitably left an impression that pluralism is inherently evil. Although Newbigin was a great ecumenical pioneer for Christian unity, what message is he sending to churches in Asia? Newbigin might not have intended to nullify the experience that he acquired in India while he was Bishop of Madras, Church of South India, but it is essential to ask whether his attitude toward pluralism is pertinent to the pluralistic Asian realities.

This article first sketches Newbigin’s critique of Western culture and Western Christianity, then moves to the quest for truth and how that relates to the Asian context. It argues that the discussion of truth in Asia needs a different paradigm

than apologetics; meanwhile the Gospel opens for an inquiry to epistemology and theological construction.

The Threat of Pluralism

This section briefly outlines Newbigin’s thoughts on the relation between pluralism and truth. The austere pastor and preacher avows, “Christians must welcome some measure of plurality but reject pluralism.”² Plurality does not pose the same threat as pluralism does. Plurality refers to a state of being plural, and the world is indwelt with numerous races and people of different backgrounds and opinions. Newbigin did not have a problem with that, but he believed the plurality of cultures does not end in itself. It serves as an entry point where the transcendent love of God in Christ is at work. By contrast, pluralism leads to a rejection of Christ’s uniqueness, given its validation of all truth claims.

Cultural Pluralism

Newbigin identified two levels of pluralism, namely, cultural pluralism and religious pluralism. The former one is a direct result of the Enlightenment. Newbigin criticized the dominance of the scientific worldview that leads to a dichotomy of objective facts and subjective values. Science deals with facts, so it births objective truth, while religion is all about subjective

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 14.

2. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 243.

values. Drawing on Michael Polanyi's epistemological framework, Newbigin challenged the rendering of the Christian faith as personal opinions that are to be practiced in the private realm. The objective scientific fact alone undergirds the idea of progress and becomes the prevailing philosophy guiding public policies, international relations, and even the church's mission in the Western world.

In his critique of the scientific worldview, Newbigin did not rule out the influence of science; but he made clear that the future of humanity is not grounded in human rationality. The fullness of truth is yet concretized by the historical presence of Jesus. In other words, the scientific worldview relativizes the Gospel truth by treating philosophical speculations as primary. So Newbigin asks, "How can we...explain our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?"³ Only Christ, in whom the authority of God is revealed, shows us the way to fullness.

The notion of truth takes a new turn when linked with the authority of God. All confidence and certainty in life comes not from created things, but from God who is the author of all things, and who self-reveals through Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection in the course of human history. George Hunsburger thus regards Newbigin's contribution of upholding the "total fact of Christ" in the currents of relativism as a "postmodern apologetic."⁴ It is true that Newbigin saw pluralism as a threat to the integrity of Christianity. He clearly stated that "Christians in

Europe may continue to be a small and even shrinking minority."⁵ Newbigin, in the meantime, turned it around and saw it as an opportunity for the renewal of the church in the West; for it "summons to self-searching, to repentance, and to fresh commitment."⁶

Religious Pluralism

Besides cultural pluralism, Newbigin took seriously the issue of religious pluralism. He is critical of the proposal that suggests all religious claims are equally valid, such as the position of John Hick, who is a proponent of the unity of religions.⁷ To Newbigin, there is no common religious experience to start with, and no other religions are comparable to the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Unlike close-minded Christian exclusivists, Newbigin paid frequent visits to the Hindu temple and spent time conversing with gurus while he was a missionary to India. But Newbigin insists no truth is found outside the uniqueness of Christ's saving work. All religions are culturally-conditioned. Even Hinduism, Newbigin observes, endorses "the co-option of Jesus, the domestication of the gospel into the Hindu worldview."⁸ Yet Christ represents the ultimate transcendent reality. The work of Christ realizes God's purpose for humankind, because the one chosen is not against but for the rest of the world.

3. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 21.

4. George R. Hunsburger, "Faith and Pluralism: A Response to Richard Gelwick," <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/TAD%20WEB%20ARCHIVE/TAD27-3/TAD27-3-pg19-29-pdf.pdf>

5. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 244.

6. Ibid.

7. Cf. Graham Adams, *Christ and the Other: In Dialogue with Hick and Newbigin* (UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010).

8. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 96.

A Challenge to the Inconsistency of Western Christian Practice

Against the pluralistic and relativistic currents of his time, Newbigin's conviction of the Gospel as truth is bold and daring. Being aware of the Western cultural captivity of the Gospel, Newbigin challenged the universalizing forces of the Enlightenment that attempt to weave together the world with reason. The myth of progress takes over the role of faith. Newbigin was sad to see the history of Christianity move from cultural disintegration to cultural imperialism. Being propelled by its sense of cultural superiority, the West tends to morally judge other races and traditions by its secularist cultural values. The globalization of certain standards of morality, in particular human rights, becomes normative. Paul Rajashekar questions the assumption behind human rights. He cites the case of proselytism:

Proselytism thus raises serious questions about issues of human rights pertaining to religious freedom, understood both as *freedom of religion* and *freedom from religion*. The exercise of the freedom of religion includes the right to profess, practice and propagate and the freedom from religion implies the right not to be coerced or persuaded into accepting religious beliefs and behavior.⁹

Kameron Carter is also suspicious that the "global" in any globalizing endeavors (such as the global civil society) takes root in a "problematic Christian social

imagination"; the West symbolizes the centrifugal force universalizing Western cultural values and "a spatially uneven reality" is formed through the West's civilizing mission to the rest.¹⁰ This reality had already taken place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century when colonialism gathered momentum in the lands of Asia. The "idea of Asia" was an invention in which "the West is the parent, and Asia is the child."¹¹ Local cultures in Asia are considered inferior to their Western counterparts. Asians are a people to be subsumed by Western discipline.

In her book titled *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak understands the subaltern as socially inferior. The reality in which they are living is re-presented by other hierarchically superior groups.¹² In Newbigin's description, certain Indians acted, spoke, and dressed very much like their counterparts in the West. The subaltern's experience was not exclusive to India, and it came in different forms in different parts of Asia during the colonial era. As a way of self-protection, these people adopted almost all aspects of the lives of the colonizer. Their cultural identity is under-represented and their

10. J. Kameron Carter, "On 'the Global' in Global Civil Society: Towards a Theological Archaeology of the Present," in William F. Storrar, Peter J. Casarella, and Paul Louis Metzger eds., *A World for All? Global Civil Society in Political Theory and Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 300.

11. David Birch, Tony Schirato and Sanjay Srivastava, *Asia: Cultural Politics in the Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1–24.

12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 79–80.

9. J. Paul Rajashekar, "Proselytism in an Age of Pluralism," in Marshal Fernando and Robert Crusz, eds., *Theology Beyond Neutrality: Essays to Honour Wesley Ariarajah* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2011), 235.

Christian faith directly influenced by Western ideology.

In view of the negative impacts brought by contemporary Western culture, Newbigin reflected on the meaning of hope for the redemption of fallen civilization. He says "[i]t is only as we are truly 'indwelling' the Gospel story, only as we are so deeply involved in the life of the community which is shaped by this story that it becomes our real 'plausibility structure,' that we are able to steadily and confidently live in this attitude of eager hope."¹³ In other words, the authenticity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ puts asunder any message that upholds human power and self-seeking intentions. And the truth of the Gospel is where the hope of humanity lies.

The Gospel as Truth Revisited

Newbigin has demonstrated a hermeneutic of truth relevant to the contextual situations of his time. In short, pluralism is an enemy to truth. Newbigin replaced the truth of human rationality by the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Truth" is understood in a singular term. What then does it mean and has it meant to the rest of the world, and, in this case, the pluralistic Asian context? No implication is suggested for repudiating Newbigin's response to pluralism. The questions, however, underscore the different challenges taking place in the Asian context, and that opens for further discussion on the meaning of the Gospel as truth.

Dueling Notions of Truth

Truth does not reside in human beings, but the authority of God that is manifest in Jesus who died and was raised from the

dead for the world. While the conviction that "Christ is Lord" is based on the total fact of Christ, the objectivity of the Gospel is fundamental to Newbigin. Newbigin

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drew less attention to the significance of the presence of Christ in the faith of individuals and their transformation of life. Certainly, Newbigin's primary focus was the cultural impacts on the church's self-understanding and its mission. The relation between the Gospel and the faith of Christians is secondary. Jesus Christ, according to Newbigin, is the mediator between God and the people, but he treated lightly the living bond between the two. Placing pre-eminence on the transcendence of God in Christ runs the risk of minimizing the subjectivity of this form of communication. The existence of faith is subjective in nature. It takes the form of a self. Jesus is the subjective self that mediates truth through his lived experience as a faithful witness to God.¹⁴

The form of communication as a self makes possible the interaction between Jesus and other selves in the world. Therefore, Jesus, being a self in his incarnation, death, and resurrection, is subjective because this faith is a lived experience. This

13. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 232.

14. Justin D. Klassen, "Truth as a 'Living Bong': A Dialectical Response to Recent Rhetorical Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 4 (October 2008): 431–446.

lived faith serves as a living bond between God, humanity, and the world. Lives are changed because of the personal encounter (by other selves) with the being of Jesus (a self). In view of this interaction, Jesus is known as the mediator who works out the subjective form of communication. In other words, subjective experience is one essential facet in forming faith, and that is vividly illustrated in the relations between Jesus and his disciples throughout the Gospel accounts. Failing to recognize this aspect, the truth conundrum remains in the dualism of objectivity and subjectivity.

How does Newbigin's methodology become a limitation in understanding the Gospel as truth in the Asian context? Though being grounded in scripture, Newbigin seems to suggest that the ontological notion of truth defines truth as reality, and that reality surpasses other realities. This proposal is a top-down approach to the Christian faith. However, the subjective significance of the Gospel truth is deemed essential in the faith of many Asians. That is about people's experience of daily living and feelings. That is normally where people encounter Jesus, and that is where many Asian theologies tend to locate. C.S. Song audaciously claims that "we should begin where we are with what can be known through our experience in the world and see where it takes us."¹⁵ Therefore the conviction that "Christ is Lord" does not start from the truth as reality, but the lived experience of the people, through which the people would discover the work of God's activity on earth. This is what Song has termed "tracing the footsteps of God." Thereby, Asian theologies do not remain at the experiential level but build upon experience to deepen faith and to affirm the reliability of the Gospel.

Located in the Context of Pluralism

As an opponent of pluralism, Newbigin might have given the wrong impression that he took no notice of interreligious relations. However, Newbigin exchanged ideas with gurus at the Hindu temple from time to time while he was serving in India. He took part in interreligious dialogue, though it was unclear what his objective might have been. Newbigin demonstrates concern that other religions claim respective salvific roles the same way that Christ does. But this should not be the case. The so-called religious others do not talk about salvation the way Christians do. Their different truth claims are certainly conflicting, but they are not necessarily competing with one another.

Getting to the core of the issue, the Asian context has a different evolutionary story that requires contemporary Christians to have a new pair of lenses to look at pluralism. In the Asian context, pluralism goes beyond the enjoyment of diversity, but expresses the reality of what life is. For thousands of years, people of diverse religious traditions have lived peaceably with one another. Violence occurred between religions, but this was oftentimes motivated by political interests. Interreligious engagement is no longer purely religious; it is increasingly entwined with diplomatic maneuvers under the pretext of (institutionalized) human rights. What this means is that religions and conflicting worldviews are not necessarily a source of conflict, as Samuel Huntington describes in *The Clash of Civilizations*.¹⁶

Genuine communication with Asian spiritualities is needed in order to facilitate a more meaningful participation in the life of others. For instance, Hindu

15. C. S. Song, *Tracing the Footsteps of God: Discovering What You Really Believe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 6.

16. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

beliefs, such as *karma* and *samsara*, which interpret human life and the human situation in cyclical patterns, prevail in the Indian thought-world as far back as the ancient times, well before the Common Era. It is not easy for an outsider to feel sympathetic to such deep rooted Hindu thoughts. But people may listen and learn from these differences. It is a process of moving away from the promotion of the self to the wisdom of others. In other words, the different religious convictions could be a path for mutual fulfillment. Also, embracing differences and sharing peace with others are creative ways to live out the golden rule that says “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12). Christianity is not about either winning or losing souls. By all means, acknowledging the positive side of pluralism does not make one less a Christian. The Gospel in such pluralistic situations becomes unique in the sense that its inclusive nature ensures the dignity of every single person and protects the voice of minorities.

The re-appropriation of the church’s mission in the twenty-first century has to do with re-affirming pluralism in the context of Asian spiritualities. Stanley Samartha observes that many people in the West come to a *discovery* of the value of religious pluralism. This new discovery is largely based on an assumption that healthy interreligious relations are an asset for the foundation of a peaceful and better world. People in the East (or two-thirds world), however, are experiencing a *recovery* of their own spiritual and cultural values after centuries of Western hegemony.¹⁷ It would then be relevant for Asian missiology to engage the spirituality of others with a sense of intelligibility, while

faithfully witnessing to the Christian faith. In reality, the commitment to pluralism in Asian countries enables Christianity’s development and missionary activity to happen, so that people in Asia are able to hear about the Gospel, which is a faith different from their own.

Where Does the Truth Lead?

The Gospel, as Newbigin maintains, has universal significance for the world. The Gospel as truth inevitably leads to a bigger question of the ultimate purpose of God for the salvation of the world. Newbigin says, the “costly act of revelation and reconciliation which gives us that assurance also requires us to share with our fellow pilgrims the vision that God has given us the route we must follow and the goal to which we must press forward.”¹⁸ God’s salvation plan in Jesus Christ becomes the overarching theme of the Gospel. Everything comes down to one reason. By grasping the truth, people of all cultures

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17. Stanley Samartha, *One Christ—Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 9.

18. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 183.

will enjoy the promise of God in Jesus Christ. Newbigin saw history as a kind of linear development, and all things are moving toward the end of time, that is the final consummation. If the truth that Newbigin presented carries only one single focus on the fulfillment of God's purpose for the world, is it limiting the meaning of the Gospel? Is that a reductionistic theological articulation that overlooks other narratives of the Gospel?

While highlighting the purpose of God, Newbigin intentionally downplayed the dimension of love. As already mentioned, truth is the total fact of Christ in his incarnation, death, and resurrection, leading up to the fulfillment of God's purpose on earth. Newbigin criticizes C.S. Song's promulgation of love as the core truth by declaring that, "C.S. Song is one of those who wishes to play down the role of truth because, as he says, truth judges, polarizes, divides. Truth, he says, cannot unite the ununitable; only love can."¹⁹

However, Song is speaking from the experience of a community of people who had been under Western hegemony, arguing that any truth presented by the West needs to be re-examined. Song does not repudiate the importance of truth, and he actually challenges any attempt to reduce truth to a kind of factuality. He argues that "truth has to do more with believing than with knowing...I believe Jesus died for me on the cross, although his death took place two thousand years ago and there is an enormous space-time gap between him and me."²⁰ Believing happens within the realm of the love of Christ and emphasizes the significance of the lived experience. Truth is not abstract; by that, it means ideas have to appeal to particular

experience. The Gospel is truth because it speaks to many Asians who experienced the arrogance of colonialism that juxtaposes the civilizing mission embedded with self-serving endeavors. Putting it differently, love completes the truth of God.

The proclamation of the Gospel in the Asian context needs to take into consideration those who have been sinned against in a power-seeking world. In considering the pain of God as the heart of the Gospel, Kazoh Kitamori makes clear that the cross not only reveals the wrath of God, but also the love of God for the people.²¹ Growing out of Kitamori's view, the pain of God revealed through Jesus' crucifixion identifies the pain of the oppressed. The cross, which accentuates the love of Christ, not only identifies the suffering of the people who were once subjugated and their cultures and wisdom despised, but also affirms the full humanity of these crucified people. The love of Christ overpowers human ideologies and opens the way for God's distributive love. It is this kind of love that makes possible participation in the life of others, pressing not for one's own agenda but the goodness of others. In other words, the truth of the Gospel sets one free to love. Along the journey of faith, the concept of relationality is brought to light, becoming operational through day-to-day interactions, witnessing to the faithfulness of God for the world.

Conclusion

The dialogue with Newbigin demonstrates, first, the different types of epistemologies: one stresses historical facts as ontological reality and the other draws attention to lived experience and the discernment of God's activities along the faith journey. The

19. Ibid.

20. C.S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 138.

21. Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God: The First Original Theology from Japan* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005).

seemingly conflicting points of departure for theological construction are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To harmonize the existential differences of these epistemologies is somewhat idealistic for the complexity of the world, but it is not impossible to seek a common ground. More space is needed for dialogue, to challenge one another's assumptions and appreciate the different premises. The dialogue of truth finally begs the question of authority. In saying this, the issue is not which model is more authoritative; rather the issue is about how authority is mediated.

Is linking the authority of truth with the name of Jesus, as with Newbigin, problematic? What is wrong about emphasizing Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection as truth in contrast establishing the scientific worldview as primary? Is his conviction about the finality of Christ an unpardonable sin for interreligious dialogue? This article does not attempt to dismiss Newbigin's position in truth, but it asks how truth is understood in other situations, such as the context of Asian realities. Putting it another way, the focus is not on questioning the relevance of a Christocentric theology in pluralistic contexts, but the notion of Christ-centeredness.²² Is this theology Christ-centered enough to include the voices of others? A Christ-centered theology inevitably links up the relations in the Trinity. Based on the concept of *perichoresis*, each person of the Trinity plays a complementary role in the life of the others, while retaining the

distinctive identity of each person. Each person is enriched by the presence of another person, while making space for the other through the fulfillment of others.²³ If the Trinity does not imply a hierarchy of relationships, but the interpenetration of each person, how do the triune relations inform our theological construction and missiological praxis in the pluralistic world?

Newbigin used to talk about "the Church" with an uppercase. Whether or not he was referring to the Holy Catholic Church, this raises another important question for reflection. What gives unity to the church? Christianity is made up of different traditions, which represent a multitude of voices from different racial, linguistic, cultural, gender, and educational backgrounds. No single tradition can grasp the whole truth. All traditions speak from their respective social locations to witness to the greatness of God. John Franke rightly captures this phenomenon: "Christian witness that is pleasing to the Lord will be characterized by irreducible plurality. It will be a manifold witness."²⁴ The church is unity in diversity. Embracing the plurality of truths does not mean anything goes, but guards against triumphalistic attempts to exclude the voices of others. The complexity of the world does not exhaust the promise of God for the world.

22. I want to thank Dr. John F. Hoffmeyer for his reflection on the notion of Christ-centeredness in the Christology class. To be mindful of Christ is to go back to scripture and read carefully the life and work of Jesus, before making statements about who Jesus is.

23. Mark Heim, "Interfaith Relations and the Dialogue of Human Need" in Deirdre King Hainsworth, ed. *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 142.

24. John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 8.

The Theological Educator: An Indian Perspective

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Today questions have been raised with regard to the relevance of seminary/theological education. In Germany many theological seminaries have been closed and theological education has been carried out mainly by the universities with the number of students in decline. In a symposium hosted by Patheos¹ the main theme was “Does Seminary Have a Future?” In the North American context it has been contended: “Our seminaries are dying and the Master of Divinity degree has been discredited. Will we make the necessary changes to better prepare leaders for the Church, or will we limp and wander into the future?”² The number of incoming students has been and continues to decline for quite some time. In India, while there is not much decline in the number of incoming students, there is certainly decline in the standard of the incoming students. Many who apply for admission at theological colleges have little chance otherwise to begin a career. This trend is found among almost all theological colleges in all denominations. At the same time, new technologies, particularly those associated with “online,” “distance,” or “distributed” education, are profoundly

changing the theological educational landscape.

In this context there is a need for every theological school and theological teacher to engage in a series of genuine initiatives of introspection, restructuring, and re-imagination to make theological education more relevant and meaningful. At the same time, adequate attention needs to be given to transform the vocation of theological teachers by deepening their commitment and enhancing their academic interests.

Objectives of Theological Education

Theological education is a process of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social growth. Theological educators have a vital role to play in this process. In this regard three aspects are important in theological education: academic excellence, practical skills, and personal formation. All three are imperative and must be given importance. Theological education is expected to mentor and prepare each new generation of Christian ministers, who are called to be enablers and facilitators of the whole people of God in their discernment and praxis of Christian mission and ministry.

The Vocation and Role of Theological Educators

The vocation of teaching faculty should be understood in the context of theological education as the task of the whole church.

1. Patheos is a website founded in 2008 focused on providing balanced information about various religions.

2. David Buschart, “Forget the Ivory Towers: Seminaries and Their Challenges,” *www.patheos.com*, October 17, 2011.

Their roles in the theological ministry of the church are crucial for the life and witness of the whole church.

The vocation of theological educators is more than a job or a career. It is the creative response of committed individuals to the discernment of a divine call to be engaged in the ministry of equipping people for God's mission and ministry. It is a vocation to journey with men and women in their ministerial formation and discernment process—to mentor them in their academic journeys; to inspire, motivate, and accompany them in their faith journeys; to help them to adopt and follow alternative patterns of Christian mission, ministry, and leadership; to encourage and enable them to dream new visions; to challenge them to question time-honored traditions in church, society, and academy, while re-imagining them contextually; to provoke and enrage, at the same time encouraging and motivating them to become prophetic in their public witness; and to surround them with prayer, friendship, and fellowship. This process helps students to think theologically, react pastorally, and act justly. However, too often theological schools and theological educators act as if they are self-contained and do not need pastors, laypeople, congregations, or society for their institutional sense of mission and vitality, thereby establishing and living in a ghetto. The vocation of theological educators involves responsibility toward the church, the wider society, and the academy. However, to be such instruments in the formation of the students, theological educators need to become role models. Of course, we are all human beings with human weaknesses. However, this should not become an excuse to escape from ethical and moral responsibilities. Theological educators need to practice what they preach, remembering that one's life speaks louder than one's words. Students watch

their teachers carefully. Therefore those who are given the task of forming the next generation of ministers should give special attention to the following four aspects.

1. Academic Commitment

Theological education is an academic activity. Unfortunately, this aspect of theological education is often forgotten and neglected in the Indian context. As a result, the general perception of theological education is merely to "mold" future pastors, or rather the "*poojaris*" and priests of the church. Here ministry is understood exclusively as ordained ministry. As a result, theological education is primarily about developing the pastoral "skills" of candidates and teaching them the doctrines and liturgies of the church. There is a misconception that deeper engagement with theological issues will affect the "simple faith" of the congregation. Several church leaders, sometimes even bishops, earnestly believe that an academic commitment to theological subjects is a threat to the ministerial formation of theological candidates. In this context both the church and theological schools must rediscover the academic soul of our faith commitment. There is a need to have an honest and deeper dialogue between theological schools and churches to rediscover the academic dimension of our faith.

At the same time, theological educators need to re-visit the academic commitment which is the part of their vocation. One needs to be interdisciplinary in attitude and training. Study outside one's academic field is no longer optional for theological educators; it is a necessity for responsible scholarship and teaching. This may require theological educators to transform and overhaul their approaches to teaching the traditional academic disciplines.

The boundaries of disciplines must be blurred and expanded in order to be

relevant to a dynamic world, not only within theological disciplines but beyond them to the secular disciplines.

Furthermore, academic research and writing are crucial not only for the academy but also for the church. Having recognized the call to create and prepare resources for the edification, strengthening, and growth of the academic and church community, theological institutions and teaching faculty need to continue to serve the church in her teaching ministry in diverse ways. Lack of proper theological understanding among church people regarding their faith endangers them to become manipulated by sectarian leaders. Therefore, it is necessary to produce materials especially in indigenous languages on various theological and ethical issues for the benefit of the congregation. However, one can identify a gradual decline in the academic interest and capability of theological educators for this work. Not many teaching faculty are interested in research and publications. Some are not even interested in upgrading our own academic competence. Frequently, there is no motivation to engage in rigorous academic research and writing, insofar as there is absolutely no encouragement or recognition by the institutions. Research and publications are not considered at the time of evaluations, promotions, and the selection of principals or other administrative positions. The culture of lethargy and the non-recognition of academic work call for a conscious attempt to deepen commitment to rigorous academic research and publications.

2. Pastoral Commitment

Ministerial formation is another important objective of theological education. Theological education should enable students to develop a passion and commitment to ministry on the one side and to have a

critical understanding of ministry, so as to perceive and develop relevant, contextual forms of ministry in their particular ministerial settings. Teaching faculty in theological education should have closer association with churches, with whom they can engage in diverse forms of ministry even during their theological careers. The practice of engaging as “adjunct pastors” in local congregations is a good practice which provides theological educators opportunities to remain active in the local congregation. Ministerial experience should not just be a qualification for appointment to a teaching faculty, but it is essential that it continues even while one serves in the field of theological education. Pastoral work is more than *poojari* work. It is to be in solidarity with a community and work with them, participating in their happiness and sorrow in the different situations of life. This is a totally different experience from life on a theological campus. In this regard the observation of a pastor is worth noticing:

Whereas all of the faculty in my spiritual direction program were experienced spiritual directors and practiced spiritual direction for us and with us, it was not always evident that my seminary professors were active participants in the church, even though a primary purpose of seminary is to form future leaders of the church... One root cause of this situation is that many seminary professors become professors instead of pastors because they are more drawn to *information* about Christianity (religious studies) than to imitating a life of radical love, compassion, and forgiveness that was embodied in the life of the historical Jesus (formation).³

3. Carl Gregg, “More Formation, Less Information,” *www.patheos.com*, October 18, 2011.

3. Social Engagement of Theological Educators

Social engagement is another important component for theological educators. The presence of God in Christ in history is a presupposition for our social engagement. If it is not incorporated into theological education, theology would turn into a mere ghetto. The locus of theology is not a particular geographical place, but a substantial situation in which theology offers itself, allowing itself to be affected, questioned, and enlightened. It is difficult to find God and read adequately the texts about God apart from this locus. Going to this setting, remaining in it, and allowing oneself to be affected by it, is essential to theology. Social engagement is also necessary because present theological education in India emphasizes doing theology from the perspectives of the margin. Concrete engagement in socio-political-ecological issues qualifies a theological teacher to be more effective and engaged in on-the-ground realities. Our theological articulation should be bound up with its function in the community. We need to understand the “*Sitz im Leben*” (setting in the life of the people), because without that our theology becomes irrelevant for the people around us.

It has been rightly said that “the term contextualization includes all that is implied in indigenization or inculturation, but also seeks to include the realities of contemporary, secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice.... Contextualization both extends and corrects the older terminology. While indigenization tends to focus on the purely cultural dimension of human experience, contextualization broadens the understanding of culture to include social, political, and economic questions. In this way, culture is understood in more dynamic and flexible ways, and is seen not as closed and

self-contained, but as open and able to be enriched by an encounter with other cultures and movements.”⁴ It has been rightly argued that theological activities are the search to understand what it means to be fully human in one’s own struggle for wholeness of life.⁵

Sometimes theological teachers tend to play the safe game of detaching themselves from controversial issues in church

Our theological articulation should be bound up with its function in the community.

and society to ensure smooth promotion into higher positions of power and recognition. Many of us who present papers and give lectures on the prophetic role of theological education and the need to oppose unjust structures and practices, keep quiet when it comes to concrete issues. At other times, we seem to live in a world of fortified institutional campuses, where the cries and lamentations emerging from the people on the street are not heard. Too often, people at the margins have become an empirical category for research and

4. Charles E. Van Engen, “Toward a Contextually Appropriate Methodology in Mission Theology” in Charles H. Kraft, ed. *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 194.

5. Prasanna Kumari, “Feminist Hermeneutics: A Debate” in Prasanna Kumari, ed. *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, (Chennai: Gurukul, 1999), 213.

publications. We have become insensitive, blind, and dead to the injustice prevailing in the church. Ecclesiastical control of our theological institutions seems to inhibit this further. It is nonsensical to expect that institutions would reward teaching faculty who question current church practice or engage prophetically in the church and society. An unwavering commitment to stir the conscience of the church and its leadership, therefore, should become a faith imperative for all who are involved in the vocation of theological education.

4. Spiritual Commitment of Theological Educators

Theological education is not merely an intellectual or academic exercise; rather it is an act of faith commitment to God in

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Jesus. Without commitment to God and the personal experience which comes out of it, our theology remains a mere abstraction. As Sadhu Sundar Singh held, "We know *about* theology, but He is the source of theology itself."⁶ It has been rightly claimed, "The Jesus we interpret must be a Jesus we

'know,' not just a Jesus we know about."⁷ However, the word "knowing" should not be understood in a strictly epistemological viewpoint. Knowing also involves an "I-Thou" relationship. Objective knowing is important, but it is not exclusive. Without a faith relationship, proper knowledge of God is not possible. There should be not only knowledge *about* God, but a personal knowledge of God.

The knowing of God has to go beyond the historical data to a personal relationship in which one knows Jesus. "Scientific," "objective," and "detached" study of God may help us to know God to a certain extent, but to know "more" of God, we need to have a personal relationship of faith. The more the relationship deepens, the more knowing of God takes place. It is important to open oneself to the message of Gospel, which is true discipleship. Hence the spiritual commitment of the theological educator is crucial. Theology is rightly defined as "the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in a clearest and most coherent language available."⁸ Participating in the community's faith is imperative.

Credibility of the Person

The integrity of the theological educator plays a vital role in theological education. Our life speaks louder than our words. In the process of formulating and molding young people for the ministry of God, theological teachers need to

7. George Sores-Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality," in *Spirituality of the Third World*, eds., K.C. Abraham and B. Mbuy-Beya (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1994), 148.

6. Sadhu Sundar Singh, "The Living Christ," in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, eds. R.S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), I: 75.

8. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1977), 1.

mold their own lives. In a context where time-honored practices and role models in church and society seem to be losing their credibility—becoming irrelevant and reactionary—theological educators should be committed to instill new hope in their students. To this end they should be able to quote their own lives. However, this is a costly commitment as it requires us to live out our faith. Theological teachers—through their lives, social and ecclesial intervention and engagement, and their witness in the community—should serve as role models and be able to convince their students that alternatives are not only possible but necessary and that one needs to strive toward them.

Conclusion

Christian faith can be defined as “faith seeking understanding.”⁹ Anselm’s search for faith seeking understanding is a search to actualize the faith—to see God and, in seeing God, to come to know God with more certainty and assurance than ever before. According to Augustine, “I believe in order that I may understand.” Knowledge of God not only presupposes faith, but also restlessly seeks deeper understanding.¹⁰ This should be the urge of every believer. Each one is called to

grow in the knowledge of God; the task of theological education derives from this challenge. However, it is not that the academy teaches while the other learns. Rather, it is a process of learning in which all are called to follow where the academy leads. Theology is “an activity in which all members of the community of faith participate in appropriate ways.”¹¹ In this process the church, theological schools and universities, and theological faculty have mutual responsibility and accountability. The Consultation on Curriculum Revision of the Senate of Serampore College claims:

The objective of Theological Education is not to pack students with information, but to equip them to be sensitive to the realities in which we live and to respond creatively to the realities. It is not only to equip students for pastoral ministry and other diversified forms of ministry, but also to equip the whole people of God in meeting new challenges they face in living out their faith and to witness to the gospel in a multi-religious context and in a situation marked by erosion of values. In other words the objectives of the Theological Education are twofold: understanding and strengthening responsible faithfulness to the gospel and deepening commitment to the praxis of discipleship.¹²

9. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth in *The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87.

10. Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 338.

11. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 10.

12. Unpublished paper.

From Windhoek to Wartburg: The Vital Role of the Lutheran Church in Namibia's Struggle for Independence¹

Ralston Deffenbaugh

The Lutheran World Federation

It was a great privilege, for which I am very grateful, to be able to return to Wartburg Theological Seminary to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Namibia's independence. Why Wartburg? A distinctive hallmark of Wartburg Seminary has been its global vision and engagement. Over many years, Wartburg Seminary has made a point of having international students and staff. These people have shaped Wartburg Seminary and the American church. In turn, they have brought the influence of what they learned and experienced back to their home countries. Wartburg Seminary's witness is, as the hymn would put it, across the world and across the street. This experience of mutual exchange was especially important with Namibia.

I am also very much aware that that

type of witness bears a risk and can have a price. In January 2010 Haiti was struck by the massive earthquake that took more than 200,000 lives. One of those killed was Wartburg Seminary student, Ben Larson, who in his final year of study was there for January term.

I was last at Wartburg Seminary some twenty-seven years previously, in 1983 when the school hosted an international Lutheran conference on Namibia. Among those who helped sponsor the conference were the seminary, the American Lutheran Church with its global mission director, Mark Thomsen, and The Lutheran World Federation. Among those who helped organize and pay for the conference were Solveig and Peter Kjeseth, Susan and Red Burchfield, Ilah and Bill Weiblen, and their families. Twenty-eight Namibians were present. Out of that conference came the founding of National Namibia Concerns, the American grassroots advocacy group for a free Namibia.

This article recalls the deep level of repression that Namibia suffered under a century of foreign occupation, the first genocide of the twentieth century, and the imposition of the apartheid system. It then describes how vital was the role of the church—in Namibia and internationally—in upholding the human dignity of

1. This article is adapted from a speech given at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, on March 21, 2010, the twentieth anniversary of Namibian independence. Deffenbaugh currently serves as Assistant General Secretary for International Affairs and Human Rights for The Lutheran World Federation. From 1991–2009 he was president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. During the year of Namibia's transition to independence, 1989–90, he served as legal adviser to the Namibian Lutheran bishops.

the Namibians, helping them to resist, and facilitating the United Nations process that finally led to free and fair elections and independence.

Imagine a Country...

The first to bring the Namibian situation to Wartburg Seminary were Pastor Abisai and Mrs. Selma Shejavali. He came nearly forty years ago in 1971; she followed a year later in 1972. Imagine the country they left behind when they came to Iowa:

- Imagine a vast country the size of California and Nevada together but with only just over a million people.
- Imagine a country that had been under foreign occupation for a century, first under the Germans, then the South Africans.
- Imagine a country that had been treated brutally by its foreign occupiers. During the German occupation, in a chilling foretaste of what the Nazis would do thirty-five years later, the Kaiser's forces carried out the first genocide of the twentieth century when they tried to exterminate the Herero and Nama peoples. Under the South African occupation, the oppressive racially discriminatory system of apartheid was imposed upon Namibia.
- Imagine a country where the white settlers and occupiers—less than 1 out of 10 people—had all the privileges and opportunities and where the black African majority was discriminated against and kept down.
- Imagine a country where very few people of color even had the chance to go to high school, much less pursue university or professional or technical studies.
- Imagine a country where thousands of men from the populous north were brought south to work as migrant laborers in the mines and farms, and then

forbidden to have their loved ones come join them, forbidden to live as families.

- Imagine a country where the people of color—the 90% majority—had no right to vote or to hold political office or to help shape the future of their nation.
- Imagine a country where the mineral, agricultural, and fishing wealth went to the white minority and to foreign corporations.
- Imagine a country where the people of color had to carry passes, go through checkpoints, and could not freely travel or live anywhere without official permission.
- Imagine a country where the white occupiers sought to divide and separate the people along tribal, ethnic, and language lines, rather than bring people together.
- Imagine a country where the security forces blew up the church printing press—not just once, but twice.
- Imagine a country where the police had the power to arbitrarily arrest and detain people indefinitely, without access to counsel or to courts.
- Imagine a country where those detained were routinely beaten and tortured.

Have you ever been a delegate to a church conference or synod assembly? At one of the synod assemblies in the northern Lutheran church in Namibia in the mid-1980s, a straw poll was taken. Of the delegates in attendance, 13% said they had themselves been detained and tortured.

The Shejavalis were affected personally, even while they were in the United States. On September 11, 1975, Abisai wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of South Africa:

In the midst of my Ph.D. studies here in USA, I received a sad and terrible message from my home country, South

West Africa. I would like to share with you this message:

On August 28, 1975, South African white soldiers invaded my foster parents' home in Ongenga village, Ovamboland. They forcibly raped and beat my foster mother, who is more than 60 years old. My foster father, who is a retired Lutheran pastor, 88 years old, was beaten unmercifully while trying to protect his wife. He fell down and was continually kicked all over his body by the soldiers. Then they put him under the bed while they continued raping my foster mother. Later my foster parents were taken to the Onandjokwe hospital where they are now being treated. The names of these victims are as follows: Rev. Paulus Nailenge and his wife Mrs. Rakel Nailenge.

Imagine a country like that. That was the country that Abisai and Selma Shejavali left in the 1970s. And when they returned to that country in 1978, the police arrested and detained them for a few days, just as a warning, so they would be reminded who was boss.

The Namibians Were Not Alone

Despite the efforts of their South African occupiers to isolate them, the Namibians were not alone. This was largely because of the church. The oppression and divisions of foreign occupation and apartheid could not overcome the connections and linkages of the body of Christ.

In the mid-1800s, even before Namibia was colonized, German missionaries from the Rhineland were sent to preach the Gospel in what is now Namibia. The German missionaries later invited Finns to take up the mission field in the northern part of the territory where there were many people, but where the Germans did not have enough missionaries or resources

to expand. At first the mission work was slow and hard, bearing little fruit. The first baptism in northern Namibia came thirteen years after the arrival of the first Finnish missionaries. But the gospel was preached and heard and Namibia became a country with one of the highest proportions of Christians in the world.

Moreover, it became a land with one of the highest proportions of Lutherans—half the population! The largest church in the country, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), grew out of the Finnish mission. The second-largest church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN), grew out of the Rhenish mission. Other significant churches in Namibia include the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Dutch Reformed, African Methodist Episcopal, and Pentecostal.

It was largely through the church that black Namibians could have any access to education, health care, human dignity, and democratic decision-making. The church set up schools, hospitals and clinics, and social services for the disabled and the destitute. Through committees and assemblies at the congregational and wider church level, black Namibians had opportunities to vote and engage in community decision-making that were denied them in the public sphere.

The church also gave black Namibians contact with the wider world. The Finnish and German missionaries showed that not all whites were occupiers and adversaries.² Through the church connections, a small but important number of black Namibians were able to travel abroad; some had the opportunity to study. The Shejavalis were among them.

2. It must be said that some of the missionaries, especially among the Germans, supported and collaborated with the foreign occupation.

The Cry for Freedom

Through most of the twentieth century, Namibia (South West Africa, as it was officially known under the South African occupation) was a remote backwater with few international contacts. In international law and diplomacy, however, it was quite well known. How did this happen? In 1915, as part of the Allied war effort during World War I, South African forces invaded and conquered the colony of Deutsch Südwestafrika. For the remainder of the war, the German colony was under South African military occupation. After the war, the Treaty of Versailles set up a new system of mandated territories under the newly formed League of Nations. South West Africa was assigned as a mandate to "His Britannic Majesty," to be administered by the Union of South Africa. South Africa applied its own civil administration and laws to the Territory.

After World War II, the United Nations (UN) was the successor to the League of Nations. All of the League's mandate territories were either to become independent or made into UN Trust Territories. South Africa, however, refused to accede to this transfer. From the late 1940s, therefore, South Africa and the United Nations were in legal conflict over Namibia. This conflict intensified as it became more and more apparent that South Africa was not ruling Namibia in the best interests of the majority of its inhabitants. This was especially clear after South Africa adopted the formal policy of apartheid in 1948 and applied it to Namibia.

The international legal conflict over Namibia culminated in a decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1971. The UN Security Council had turned to the Court for a ruling as to the legal status of Namibia, in particular, as to whether South Africa's continued rule was proper under the League of Nations

Mandate. In its advisory opinion, the World Court said that South Africa's rule over Namibia was in violation of the mandate, that South Africa's continued presence in Namibia was a violation of international law, and that South Africa should withdraw immediately.

Needless to say, the court's ruling had an immense impact in Namibia. The majority of Namibians were jubilant. They knew that the way they were being treated was unjust. They wanted to be rid of the foreign occupiers. They were glad that the international community was saying that the South African occupation should end.

The South Africans, however, sought to cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the UN and of the ICJ opinion. They turned to the Namibian Lutheran church leaders, reckoning that these pious churchmen would refer to Romans 13 and say that the South Africans were the authorities appointed by God and that those who resist will incur judgment. Instead, what the South Africans received was the Open Letter of June 30, 1971.

In the Open Letter, the Namibian church leaders said that South Africa had failed to take cognizance of human rights as declared by the UN with respect to the non-white population. They quoted the violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights section by section: "Our people are not free and by the way they are treated, they do not feel safe." They concluded with this call for independence:

The Church Boards' urgent wish is that in terms of the declaration of the World Court and in co-operation with UNO, of which South Africa is a member, your government will seek a peaceful solution to the problems of our land and will see to it that Human Rights be put into operation and that South West Africa may become a self-sufficient and independent state.

It took another nineteen years for Namibia to become free. But in the hearts and minds of the Namibian people, independence was won that day of the Open Letter. They knew that their cause was just and that freedom would come. The old liberation slogan said it well: "The struggle continues. Victory is certain!"

The Struggle for Independence

The struggle for independence over the next two decades was long and painful. Many Namibians suffered, many died. Many showed remarkable and admirable fortitude and character; others were co-opted and weakened. But the commitment of the church, both in Namibia and internationally, was unwavering.

A political liberation movement for Namibia had begun to form in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), at first tried to organize and press for freedom through peaceful means. The South Africans came down on them harshly and violently. In 1966, SWAPO took the decision to launch a guerrilla war for independence. They first sought help from Western countries, but without success. They then turned to the East Bloc. The linkage of SWAPO with Communist countries was used by South Africa to tarnish both SWAPO and any other groups who shared the same aims of freedom and independence. This included the churches. By the mid-1970s, Namibia's churches and their members were paying a heavy price for the Open Letter and their witness for justice and freedom. The general secretary of The Lutheran World Federation, Carl Mau, summarized the situation in a 1975 letter to the South African prime minister:

We can only conclude that the South African government is engaging in a systematic attack upon the Christian

churches in Namibia of a kind that is intolerable and an offense to the world community of Lutheran churches.

Lutherans worldwide stood by the Namibians. In 1973, the U.S. churches set up the Lutheran Office for World Community to represent the Lutherans at the UN. It was directed first by Edward May, then by me, and now by Dennis Frado. From the beginning its top priority was advocacy for Namibia. In 1975–76, The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) provided legal assistance to the churches in Namibia after many of their members were arrested and some tried for alleged crimes of terrorism. Lutherans in Finland, Norway, and Germany set up Namibia solidarity groups. It was, however, from Wartburg Seminary that National Namibia Concerns was established, what became the major American solidarity group for Namibia. It was largely through the Lutherans that information about Namibia got out to the world. The Lutherans worked closely with the UN for Namibia.

A vital part of the solidarity with Namibia was through scholarships. Through the LWF and its member churches, several hundred Namibians had the opportunity to study abroad. Especially notable was the contribution of the U.S. Lutheran seminaries, where many young Namibian theologians had the chance to learn, as well as through the contribution of U.S. Lutheran colleges, where during the 1980s and early 1990s one hundred scholarships were made available for promising young Namibians. These programs had dual benefits—the presence of the Namibians taught Americans about Namibia and the Namibians returned to their country well-prepared and motivated to assume positions of responsibility.

Americans had a special privilege and responsibility here. Our language, English, is now the world language. Students all

over the world want to learn in English. This was and is also true in Namibia, where English is now the official language.

In 1978 the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 435, providing a framework for independence for Namibia. After persistent and numerous diplomatic efforts, South Africa finally agreed in late 1988 that the year-long transition to independence could begin in April 1989. South African withdrawal from Namibia was linked to the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. Chosen as the UN Special Representative for the process was an outstanding Finnish Lutheran diplomat, Martti Ahtisaari.³

One could go on at great length about the year of transition to independence from April 1989 through March 1990, but I will limit myself to a few observations:

The process worked! It was marvelous to see Namibia go from a country of violent repression and war (the heaviest fighting was just before the April 1989 ceasefire) to a free and fair election, a constitution adopted unanimously, and a peaceful independence.

The UN Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) could not have succeeded, were it not for the support and assistance of the Namibian churches. First and foremost, the churches provided political support and endorsement for the UN, so that Namibians in their local areas would see the UN not as fear-inducing foreigners but as people to help and support them. The churches provided the local organization to accomplish the peaceful repatriation and resettlement of some 41,000 Namibian refugees. This was organized through the Council of Churches in Namibia, where Abisai Shejavali was General Secretary. Especially in the heavily populated northern

parts of Namibia, the churches provided the UN with infrastructure of buildings and other vital assistance. Finally, the churches provided the UN with information about what was really happening in the country and advice, both political and legal, about how to proceed with the transition.

Throughout the year of transition, the Namibian churches offered their observations, insights, and recommendations. This was especially important for the repatriation of refugees, the voter registration and election campaign, the monitoring of the election, and the drafting of the constitution. Because of the voice of the church, Namibia's constitution has a very strong Bill of Rights that includes prohibition of torture, prohibition of the death penalty, prohibition of preventive detention in peacetime, and numerous provisions lifting up human dignity.

March 21, 1990, was such a joyful day! Let me read part of what I wrote from Windhoek:

It is wonderful to see the colorful Namibian flag appearing everywhere—on cars, in shops, on T-shirts, displayed outside private as well as government buildings. The street signs denoting Kaiser Strasse have disappeared; Windhoek's main street is to be renamed Independence Avenue. Yet after the public holidays of March 21 and 22 daily life has resumed in a normal and peaceful way. South African journalist Shaun Johnson, writing in the *Weekly Mail*, well summed up the unworried atmosphere: "The flurry of events proceeded haphazardly but happily, and this was due in large part to the laissez-faire, accommodating and good-natured mood of the Namibian people. Not a glimmer of violence or hostility was in evidence."

Compare that with where Namibia was a year before.

3. Ahtisaari, in part for his work on Namibia, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008.

I will conclude this section by quoting from the eloquent Preamble to the Namibian Constitution:

WHEREAS recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is indispensable for freedom, justice and peace; and

WHEREAS the said rights include the right of the individual to life, liberty and to the pursuit of happiness, regardless of race, color, ethnic origin, sex or religion, creed or social or economic status; and

WHEREAS the said rights are most effectively maintained and protected in a democratic society, where the Government is responsible to freely elected representatives of the people, operating under a sovereign constitution and a free and independent judiciary; and

WHEREAS these rights have for so long been denied to the people of Namibia by apartheid, racism and colonialism...

NOW THEREFORE, we the people of Namibia accept and adopt this Constitution as the fundamental law of our Sovereign and Independent Republic.

How Is Namibia Doing Now?

We can celebrate that after twenty years Namibia is still an independent, democratically-ruled country with a high respect for human dignity and human rights. It has been peaceful and politically stable. It remains a much happier place than under the bad old days of foreign occupation and apartheid. Yet, like any country, Namibia still faces challenges. Here are some of the ones that Namibian friends have shared with me:

- HIV and AIDS are rampant. The impact has been devastating. A quarter of the adult population may be HIV-positive. There are many people who have died in their prime years, and many orphans.

- Educational opportunities are still lacking for many black Namibians.
- Unemployment is high.
- Corruption among high-ranking officials and public servants is disturbing.
- Street crime is high in the capital, Windhoek, and the major city in the north, Oshakati.
- There remains a huge economic disparity among the population. Namibia has one of the highest levels of economic inequality in the world.
- The spirit of political intolerance is growing—even though SWAPO's majority is huge, it does not brook opposition easily.
- Namibia has failed to have a truth and reconciliation accounting for the human rights violations committed by both sides in the liberation war.

And the Shejavalis? Abisai, in his late 70s, is ministering night and day in the squatter camps outside Katutura (the black township of Windhoek). He has been without pay or pension since he reached the mandatory retirement age of 60. He speaks out publicly against corruption and for political and economic honesty. Selma has recently retired after working many years in the field of skills building and early education.

And Wartburg Theological Seminary? The seminary and the U.S. Lutheran church played important roles in witness and solidarity with that other part of the body of Christ which is in Namibia. I pray that Wartburg Seminary and our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will continue to be in solidarity with other parts of the body of Christ which are in pain. Thanks be to God that when one part of the body suffers, we can feel the pain, and that when one part is honored, we can all celebrate. It is a joy to celebrate twenty years of Namibian independence!



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Homily on the Twentieth Anniversary of Namibian Independence

Sue Moline Larson

Director, Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, 1994-2007

Associate Pastor, Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Watertown, Wisconsin, 2010-2012

Board Chair, African Network of the ELCA

Text: Luke 4:14-21

It is only in retrospect that those of us who were there realize how remarkable the events were that took place thirty-five years ago at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. I had arrived in the fall of 1974 with my husband Terry and our 9-month-old son Jonathan in protest, dreading a future in ordained ministry for our family. But it did not take long to be taken in by the transformative influence of the seminary community and the wonderful friendships that formed and grew through a rich mix of people, many from other parts of the world.

Among the most compelling and engaging was the gracious and charismatic pastoral family from Namibia, Abasai and Selma Shejvali together with their two daughters. Because of the warm bonds that formed with the faculty and families of students during the years that Abasai pursued his doctoral degree at Aquinas Seminary, concern for the safety of their family when they returned to Africa in 1978 was the cause and inspiration for organizing the seminary's involvement in and commitment to Namibian independence. It is not possible to summarize the history of National Namibia Concerns without beginning with the Shejvali family and the story they told about the important work and courageous witness of Namibian Christians who struggled to survive under

the cruel occupation of the South African government's apartheid regime.

During the years they lived in Dubuque, the Shejvali family maintained a busy speaking schedule, accepting invitations from congregations and community groups in the region to explain, time and again, the true nature of apartheid, the inherently racist structure of separatism imposed by the white supremacist government in South Africa, which was enforced by a brutal military presence that punished anyone of any age or gender who expressed opposition. Abasai and Selma worked tirelessly to get this message out, even as publicity endangered their loved ones at home. Since so few people had ever heard of Namibia or fully understood the inhumanity of apartheid, they were determined to inform American Christians to exercise their political freedoms and advocate the U.S. and South African governments to press for change.

Most congregations viewed Africa through a lens of distant evangelical outreach by missionaries, who returned to tell stories of living and working among the heathen. But Selma and Abasai had more to share than quaint details of a distant African mission. Their stories changed the quiet complacency of the congregations, women's organizations, and seminary community. Their message hit home when word was

received that Abasai's adoptive parents, an elderly Lutheran pastor and his wife, were assaulted and beaten in their home, and that relatives of Selma, leaders in their communities, had mysteriously disappeared.

Even after the Shejavali family returned to Namibia, the reality of the South African government's surveillance became evident in a letter-writing exchange in the editorial pages of the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*. Letters to the editor appeared from a man whose identity kept changing, although his message did not. He wrote that anti-apartheid advocates were telling lies and that the government of South Africa had Namibia's best interests at heart. Eventually we learned that he was a registered agent of the South African government, who screened newspapers and magazines in the United States for articles criticizing apartheid and then fired off responses that challenged the facts, rewriting reality through lies. After several exchanges, the *Telegraph Herald* refused to print any more letters. However, this exchange revealed how intentionally and efficiently the South African government engaged in subverting the truth.

Unfortunately, advocacy did not always take hold. Seminary professor Peter Kjeseth accompanied the Shejavali's to meetings with the Iowa District Congressman from Dubuque to request his support in the struggle for freedom in Namibia. Not only was he not sympathetic, he allied himself with the South African cause. Aware of the efforts of the Shejavali's to influence public understanding of the oppression of apartheid, the South African government invited the congressman to a deluxe tour of the nation. When his term in Congress ended, he took a job in Johannesburg for the South African Chamber of Commerce. Several years later, a former Iowa governor said that South African officials told him that they knew

more about his comings and goings than did his own people in Iowa!

In 1978 Abasai completed his PhD and the family prepared to return home. The community was very worried and many urged them to stay in the U.S. to work for the struggle here. But they were determined to rejoin the struggle at home and were immediately detained by security forces and held for twenty-four hours. They were released, however, when it became clear that they had friends in the United States who were watching and protesting.

Beyond showing concern for their physical safety, Solveig Kjeseth (spouse of Peter) was more practical in her efforts, circulating an appeal for money for school uniforms and tuition so the little girls could enroll in school. Solveig Kjeseth and Ilah Weiblen, spouse of president William Weiblen, continued to mimeograph and mail updates as news arrived. Graduates took the news with them wherever they were called to serve and the Namibia story became a seed planted in congregations around the county. In many districts of the American Lutheran Church, committees were formed, anti-apartheid conferences took place, and commitments were made to the cause of independence for the far-away nation of Namibia.

In southern Wisconsin, we were among those who took prayer chains to the halls of Congress, called on elected leaders, worked through the United Nations Commission on Namibia to send materials to Angolan refugee camps, raised funds for the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO, the independence movement labeled "communist" by South Africa), took visiting Namibian pastors and speakers to the state legislature, and organized newspaper interviews. Moreover, we joined in campus and union campaigns to convince the state Investment Board, the state teachers' union, and the church's

Board of Pensions to divest from businesses actively supportive of South Africa. We told the horror stories of pastors pulled from worship to be beaten or even killed in front of their parishioners as intimidation to those who would dare to speak out.

When the United Nations finally brought troops into the county, countered the South African soldiers, set up polling places across the country to allow Namibians to vote for the first time in free and fair elections, it was as if a miracle had occurred. The beloved scripture that Lutheran church leader Zephaniah Kameeta translated so beautifully, Psalm 126, came alive. The promises of Christ from Luke 4 finally foretold a free and brighter future for a land that had been so bound: "He has

sent me to proclaim release to the captives and...to let the oppressed go free."

As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America observes its twentieth-fifth anniversary, it is an appropriate time to celebrate our shared history with Namibian Lutherans half a world away. The commitment and solidarity that began in the Wartburg Theological Seminary community, supported by faculty members, led by president Bill Weiblen and Ilah Weiblen, was inspired by the unwavering determination and courageous witness of the Shejvali family, who spoke for an entire nation. Their story became our story and we thank God for bringing and holding us together in solidarity and in prayer.



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Book Reviews

Essential Lutheranism: Theological Perspectives on Christian Faith and Doctrine. By Carl E. Braaten. Delhi, N.Y.: American Publicity Bureau, 2012. 205 pages. \$17.00.

Renowned Lutheran theologian, Carl Braaten, contributes another clearly and pointedly expressed treatment of core theological convictions in *Essential Lutheranism*. To those familiar with Braaten's earlier works, especially his *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, many of the central themes will appear familiar: law and gospel, the doctrine of the church, ecumenism, the centrality of evangelization (mission), Luther's two kingdoms concept, and eschatology. Each topic is addressed with the insight of a knowledgeable and experienced teacher. Those looking for a basic introduction to the foundations of Lutheran doctrine and logic will appreciate the wisdom Braaten has attained through years of collaborative and ecumenical work. All this is set within the framework of a deep commitment to Lutheranism as a reform movement within the whole catholic church, which Braaten and others describe as "Evangelical Catholic."

What is striking about Braaten's recent writing is the assumption that the Lutheran theological tradition defended in this and other recent books is the almost exclusive possession of those who belong to his circle. Sweeping generalizations pop up throughout the book against the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and anyone who represents this church body, churchwide officials and teaching theologians alike. While the Lutheran theological essentials articulated by Braaten are widely shared and taught in the college and seminary classroom of this church body, Braaten has become so disillusioned that the sharp conclusions that exist between his position and certain of the denomination's policies are treated virtually as church-dividing. The strong sense of *adi-*

aphora, which Braaten does apply to certain well-considered conclusions, is allowed no place in relation to the litmus test issues to which he reacts so strongly. It is regrettable that this outstanding theologian has left behind this legacy of bitterness, especially when Lutheran theologians share and teach the core of his essential Lutheran convictions.

The contributions of Carl Braaten to Lutheran theological and missiological thinking in the last generation have been enormous. Together with other colleagues, he has crafted the shape of the Evangelical Catholic position into a formidable argument. This book once more reveals the author's mastery in expressing complex theological formulations in an accessible and convincing way. One would only hope for a little pinch of generosity and appreciative inquiry toward those with whom the author on certain—especially ethical—conclusions so vehemently disagrees.

Craig L. Nesson

Dorothee Soelle, Mystic and Rebel: The Biography. By Renate Wind. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9808-9. xiii and 203 pages. Cloth. \$25.00.

We thought we knew Dorothee Soelle. However, through Renate Wind's compassionate, truthful telling, we truly begin to know the woman who at the age of twelve in 1941 had not yet felt the terrors of the War in the affluent suburbs of Cologne and who at seventy was celebrated ecumenically and globally as theologian, poet, and activist for peace and justice. Soelle sought the truth, so she studied theology and believed it must be lived and experienced.

Wind's book is compelling drama. Soelle searched in post-war Germany for a way to move from German humanist culture, without bypassing repentance, toward a radical Christianity. She became student, writer, wife, mother, and instructor in a girls' high school, all acceptable roles for a woman in the 1950s and early 1960s. Then, especially for that period, came catastrophe: separation, divorce, a woman on her own. But then



emerged also new communities, new challenges and “Political Evensong.” Soelle’s deep theological inquiry, prolific writing, speaking, and activism led her to become world-renowned and controversial. She was invited to discussions, conferences, political activism, and teaching assignments, including a professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Dorothee Soelle became one of the most highly regarded theologians of her time, yet never received a teaching appointment in Germany. She believed the only way one can really grow into Christ is to grow into the movement for resistance.

Renate Wind, professor of biblical theology and church history at the Lutheran University in Nuremberg, is author and peace activist. English-readers will not be able to put this volume down, well translated from the German by Nancy Lukens and Martin Rumscheidt. Wind describes herself as a younger contemporary of Dorothee Soelle, entrusted with this biography by Dorothee’s second husband, Fulbert Steffensky, and friend, Luise Schottroff. Each of us will connect with this book in our own way and find our own questions. Mine: How does one deal with the contradictions among wanting to believe in the superiority of one’s country, living a relatively privileged and calm life, and the realities of violence, injustice, and death? How am I inspired to do theology sensually, poetically, and politically?

Norma Cook Everist
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Christian Music: A Global History. By Tim Dowley. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. 264 pages. Hardcover. \$35.00.

Obviously geared as an entry-level volume for the amateur, this book with its ambitious global reach manages to pack a lot of information into 264 pages. Dowley and his cohort of eight specializing contributors serve up nourishment of all kinds on subjects ranging from *organum* to organs, from carillons to conch shells, from Bach to Brubeck. What’s to like about this book are its layout (on high-

gloss paper) and the abundance of color illustrations. Unexpected treats are a substantive first chapter on the Jewish foundations and the author’s commitment to include contributions to Christian music from women, something of a trail-blazing task. But we are treated to a whole chapter on Hildegard of Bingen and introduced to the sacred music of people like Amy Beach (who would have known?). A helpful list of additional reading, a discography, a few Internet sources, and ample notes complete the volume.

A funny thing happened on the way through the book. I had this sense that I had been here before, that is, reading about the history of Christian music in a book this size with the same feel. Voilà, there it was, on the top shelf, resting after a read some eight years ago. Same size, same subject (mostly), same kind of paper, *and* same publisher(s). Andrew Wilson-Dickson’s *The Story of Christian Music* was published in 1992 by Lion Hudson in Oxford, then jointly with Fortress in 1996. Dowley’s volume is issued jointly by Lion Hudson and Fortress.

Apart from the curious and puzzling decisions leading to the publication of these two volumes there is an irresistible temptation to compare them. One might argue that Dowley’s volume purposely embraces a more global perspective. Yet the uneven, incomplete, in some cases bifurcated contributions on ethnic music pale in comparison, for instance, to Wilson-Dickson’s coverage of the Christian music of Africa. Moreover, in the latter book multiple color illustrations are accompanied by a rich collection of musical examples so, for example, one can actually see how chant notation looks, both in the east and the west.

Music historians and historians in general (such as Dowley) can’t be expected to know everything. So, some slips here and there are to be expected. But there seem to be more than necessary in Dowley’s book, especially when it comes to matters Lutheran. The melody by the name of *Allein Gott in der höh sei Ehr* (for the hymn “All Glory be to God on High”) was not a *new* tune but is a reworking by Nicolas Decius of an older chant melody for the “Gloria in excelsis.”



Luther's musical assistant is Johann Walter, not Johann Walther, organist and cousin of J. S. Bach.

As a book, the Dowley volume is quite attractive. But its dress belies some major internal difficulties, in some ways shared also by the Wilson-Dickson project. Here we mention two. First, writing about Christian music doesn't need to follow the well-worn path travelled by music historians in general, that is, the presentation of repertoires according to "periods" of music history. Dowley tries to do that but gets into trouble here and there because the material just doesn't fit well. This tired approach needs to be traded in for a methodology that matches the material at hand. For instance, he could have arranged things according to genre, or location, or denomination, the latter providing a perfect bridge to pressing questions about the why of certain repertoires.

Second, a still larger issue has to do with the unrecognized elephant in the book: What is "Christian music"? Dowley himself asks the question, suggests several answers but never really addresses it head-on. Thereby he creates notable imbalances and a certain aimlessness. Pergolesi gets three separate mentions in the book while Distler receives about ten lines, and American composer and church musician, Dudley Buck, is not even mentioned. So, what is Christian music? It would have been more helpful had Dowley written a history of assembly music, which is the music emerging from Christians at public worship. Other volumes could follow: a history of Christians using music for their own spirituality; a history of music with Christian themes.

Until these histories are written, pastors, seminarians, interested amateurs, and church musicians are served by the two volumes mentioned above, the better of which, in this reviewer's mind, is the one by Wilson-Dickson.

Mark Bangert

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Transforming Vision: Exploration in Feminist The*logy. By Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9806-5. x and 242 pages. Cloth. \$55.00.

A brilliant work, this book is invaluable in providing a feminist vision for *ekklesia* as a domination-free, violence-free assembly of religious world-making; an alternative to the tensions between modernism and post-modernism; equality not as sameness but the transformation of dehumanizing kyriarchy toward enriching differences.

Almost twenty years ago Schuessler Fiorenza's *Discipleship of Equals* gathered her work from the 1970s and 1980s. This volume circles around "power, struggle, and vision" in articulating a critical feminist political the*ology of liberation. One must name the powers of domination. She coined the neologism, "kyriarchy," understood as a complex, multiplicative, intersecting sociopolitical and cultural-religious system of super-ordination and subordination, ruling and exploitation, including class, race, gender, ethnicity, empire, and other discriminatory structures.

A critical feminist the*ology of liberation has always included the concept of structural sin, precisely because it strengthens wo/men and other oppressed people so that they, and their oppressor groups, do not regard acts of injustice, such as rape, as the personal guilt of the victim. This vision is particularly needed today in a time of political and religious regression on issues related to women.

Schuessler Fiorenza clearly addresses the phenomena of the religious right and its influence, exposing the rhetoric of "traditional family values" as patri-kyriarchal. She writes: "The much-touted Christian family is not Christian at all," in "a communal understanding of *ekklesia* as a discipleship community of equals" (103).

In a time when people from many perspectives would dismiss feminist theology, Schuessler Fiorenza fully articulates and makes the case for expanding it to include womanist, mujerista, Asian/African/Latin American, lesbian, differently-abled, Christian and Jewish wo/men's perspectives. More-



over, she strives that feminist theology is seen as important in the academy where religion is often dismissed as hopelessly irrelevant. Significantly, she continues the struggle within the Roman Catholic Church, where, she insists, the world-church lacks the fullness of catholicity when half of its members are still excluded from full rights and responsibilities. The work is far from done; all religious belief systems are experiencing the challenges of feminist re-visions. This is a clarion call for us to live a wisdom spirituality of resurrection.

Norma Cook Everist

The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation. By Richard Bauckham. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010. xi and 226 pages. Paper. \$24.95.

In *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community and Creation*, Richard Bauckham proposes a biblical and theological framework in which humans are members of God's creation and not its suppressors. In the opening chapter, Bauckham reinterprets the place of humanity in the Genesis 1 creation account, re-examining what it means for humans to have "dominion." He challenges interpretations which promote a hierarchical understanding of creation, in which every nonhuman member of the created world is subject to the human dominator. Instead, the role of the human in creation is that of stewardship, "one of care and service, exercised on behalf of God and with accountability to God" (2). Bauckham offers a scriptural understanding that humans are not placed in God's created world to do with it as we please, but are equally connected to and accountable with creation before God.

Bauckham explores a number of rich examples from Scripture to highlight the interplay between humanity and the rest of creation. He draws upon Old Testament texts from Job, the Psalms, and Isaiah, as well as New Testament passages from Matthew and Romans to explore the community of creation. The second chapter focuses on the

place of the human creature within the created realm; the third on the community of creation in which God has formed us; and the fourth is devoted to positive scriptural images of wilderness that counter traditionally negative images of wilderness. In the final chapter, Bauckham makes the provocative point that we can only understand Jesus' meta-narrative in relation to all of creation: "We can only adequately tell the story of Jesus by bringing in the whole of creation and the whole of its trans-historical story, and conversely, we can only fully and adequately tell the story of the whole world by relating it to Jesus" (144). *The Bible and Ecology* is a valuable work that is part of a greater movement to reclaim creation as a work of God and not merely resources for our use.

Seth Nelson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Reclaiming Mission as Constructive Theology: Missional Church and World Christianity. By Paul S. Chung. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-6109-7227-7. 316 pages. Paper. \$36.00.

Is mission still relevant today? While reminiscences of past mission endeavors were swarming with pride and egoism generated by Western colonialism, what justifies the proposal for "reclaiming" mission as Christian imperative? Whose mission are we talking about?

In his critical re-evaluation of the history of Western mission, Paul S. Chung believes a missional church does not necessarily associate with any form of imperialist and expansionist intents. Underneath God's mission lies the issue of hermeneutics. Chung does not explicitly explore the hermeneutics of suspicion. In line with his previous works, Chung reiterates the theological hermeneutics of word-event in dialogue with Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical method. The communication of God's word manifests God's promise to all peoples across cultures. If Christianity needs an adjective that pre-



cedes it, that will be “World” Christianity; a truly missional church is one that transcends geographical and racial boundaries, while faithfully witnessing to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Chung’s discussion of the fusion of horizons brings attention to the need for inclusive missiological praxis in multi-cultural contexts.

As a Luther scholar, Chung elucidates Martin Luther’s concept of law and gospel as an underlying principle for the hermeneutics of word-event. Within the framework of justification, Chung affirms that the justified Christian gives freely of oneself for the goodness of others. Imitating Jesus’ righteousness, the church as faith community seeks not self-serving purposes, but justice and peace. These creative expressions of God’s love strive to safeguard the integrity of creation.

Reclaiming Mission as Constructive Theology re-directs the church to focus on the world. By reading the church itself into the word-event, the church reclaims its ministry of reconciliation. Missional church attends to real life experiences and feelings. Thereby, Christian mission is a positive response to the “signs of the time.”

Man-hei Yip
*The Lutheran Theological Seminary
at Philadelphia*

Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians. By Luke Timothy Johnson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8028-0390-0. viii and 198 pages. Paper. \$23.00.

In this thin volume Luke Timothy Johnson interprets the literary unit known as *Luke/Acts* through the lens of a prophetic Jesus and prophetic early church, whose marks were: “being inspired by the Spirit, speaking God’s word, embodying God’s vision for humans, enacting that vision through signs and wonders, and bearing witness to God in the world” (4). Reading *Luke-Acts* as a continuous unit, Johnson shows how the first generation church lived a prophetic manner

of life as a way of being in the world embodied in four interlocking dimensions: poverty, itinerancy, prayer, and servant leadership. At the end of each chapter Johnson poses challenges for the contemporary church to consider these four marks of prophetic embodiment as a measure of the church’s life. His general conclusion is that the present-day church must have a real conversion in the way it thinks about things and assigns values. In essence, the church must demonstrate repentance and give witness by enacting God’s vision, ready to bear the suffering and even death that inevitably follow.

This very readable volume renders so many insights into the actions of Jesus and the early church that reading it is worthwhile simply for its unique exegesis of *Luke-Acts*. Pastors, teachers, and those involved in lay ministry, so many times necessarily “preoccupied with upkeep and maintenance, with keeping faith and tradition, with preserving the bounds of orthodoxy,” (186) will find so much to reflect on in their own witness at the most fundamental level from the author’s comments on the radical demands of poverty, prayer, itinerancy, and servant leadership which have a critical revelatory function to the church of the center. This reviewer was deeply moved by the author’s interpretive comments on *Luke-Acts* and his provocative reflections. It is a book worth a second reading.

Mario DiCicco, O.F.M.
*St. Peter’s Church in the Loop
Chicago*

Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B. By Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, editors. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-6642-3454-6. xxv and 518 pages. Hardcover. \$50.00.

There is one shelf in my library I have dedicated to “go-to” books for sermon preparation. These are books I can count on to easily locate the pericope on which I’ll be preaching; provide concise, provocative exegesis;



and spark my imagination for creativity. This volume is now added to that shelf.

The goals of this collection of 90 commentaries (including the special feature of 22 “Holy Days for Justice”) are both extensive and profound: to “help the preacher identify and reflect theologically and ethically on the social implications of the biblical readings” (x), enable preachers and congregations to use these texts to help interpret the meaning of social issues within their contexts, introduce pointed reflections on commonly overlooked justice issues (highlighted in the justice days inserted throughout the year), and offer practical ways of applying the fruits of these reflections for individual listeners and the community of faith. A quick scan of the list of stellar contributors (representing a healthy diversity of race, gender, culture, denomination, and standpoint) was my first clue that these goals would be accomplished. What surprised me was just how deft, creative, and thought-provoking each of the writers was in their essay.

I plan to add the other two volumes to my library, because there are few preaching commentaries that consistently hold us accountable to what God intends in terms of justice for individuals, churches, and their surrounding communities (inclusive of Earth and all Creation). This is a desperately needed resource for preachers, who too often fear to tread where accusations of being “too political” threaten their confidence. I am grateful that the editors and contributors have given preachers excellent tools to empower them and their congregations to envision and enact God’s transforming justice.

Leah D. Schade
The Lutheran Theological Seminary
at Philadelphia

The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship. By Gordon W. Lathrop. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 219 pages. \$49.00.

In his focus on the four Gospels, Gordon Lathrop seeks to honor both biblical criti-

cism and liturgical criticism in determining how the contemporary study of the Gospels informs the Christian assembly’s practice of Sunday worship. Since Lathrop—Professor of Liturgy Emeritus at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia—did doctoral studies in New Testament, he is exceptionally qualified to avoid the mistakes of past studies that found liturgy everywhere in the Bible. Rather he assumes what he calls a “mutual coherence between the four Gospels and Christian assembly” (5). Simply put, each Gospel was designed to be read and heard by the earliest Christians assembled in house-communities, not primarily as historical accounts of the pre-Easter Jesus (what Lathrop labels “Jesus-then”) but as lively and challenging encounters with the crucified and risen Jesus (or “Jesus-now”). Like the Letters of Paul, the Gospels are directed to fledgling Christian communities and designed to reform and reorient them.

In Part One, Lathrop considers “The Gospels and Early Christian Worship.” Chapter 1 traces how Paul employed the singular form of “gospel” (*euangelion*) for the message about the crucified and risen Jesus as a direct challenge to the imperial use of this word in heralding the saving benefits of the emperor and the Roman Empire. In turn, Mark fashions his narrative for house-churches to be oriented around the crucified and risen Jesus, overlapping themes prominent in Paul’s letters. Chapter 2 explores the distinctiveness of early Christianity as a meal fellowship particularly in light of Greco-Roman banquet ideology. Chapters 3–5 examine in detail Mark, Matthew–Luke, and John to demonstrate the fruitfulness of reading the Gospels with a focus on the worshiping assemblies. According to Lathrop, each Gospel makes a unique contribution. Mark uses his secrecy theme and concentric narrative pattern to confront house-assemblies with a narrative of Jesus on the way to the cross. Matthew employs his five discourses to present the crucified and risen Jesus as still teaching among the house-communities. Luke emphasizes meals for the assemblies as part of Jesus’ and the disciples’ long journey to Jerusalem. Finally, the Fourth Gospel uses multiple ways of alluding to the



presence of receiving assemblies, especially in its references to those Sunday assemblies where the resurrected Lord appeared to the disciples and Thomas (John 20:19–29).

Part Two contains three chapters, the first two of which draw implications for contemporary worship when the four Gospels' reforming and reorienting intentions are taken seriously: implications for "Word, Sacrament, and Assembly" in chapter 6 and "Leadership" in chapter 7. The final chapter ("The Reforming Gospels") traces the renewal for the church resulting from the biblical-liturgical movement in the twentieth century.

The book's working assumption that the four Gospels were addressing house-assemblies of Christians in the earliest time is beyond debate, yet some of Lathrop's particular readings of the Gospel narratives, though evocative, are not always easily established (e.g., can every mention of "house" [*oikos*] in the Markan narrative be read as an allusion to the place of ancient Christian meetings?).

Nonetheless, this first-rate study by Professor Lathrop yields many insights for pastors and seminarians who are serious about practicing Sunday worship "according to the Gospel." The italicized questions he poses at the end of each chapter can serve to guide such personal pondering or group discussion. Hopefully the cost of the hard cover volume will not preclude their purchasing and using it.

James L. Bailey
Wartburg Seminary

Dem Dry Bones. By Luke A. Powery. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

ISBN-10: 0-8006-9822-3. x and 160 pages. Paper. \$20.00.

There is little doubt that preaching can be big business, a commodity of sorts, which can be manipulatively packaged in a way that is extremely profitable. While forms of "prosperity gospel" are both popular, and if honest, speak to the aspirations of many poor people, the question still remains, how does it minister to one's soul in the midst of actual life with all its hardships? Luke Powery sets out

to counter the fluffy death-avoiding pulpit ministry that is unquestionably sweet but yet ultimately superficial.

With an insightful and prophetic witness, Powery reminds his readers that "Preaching hope is inadequate without taking death seriously. Not only is death the context for preaching hope, but hope is generated by experiencing death through the Spirit who is the ultimate source of hope." (10) Given this, he argues persuasively that preaching death, both our daily little deaths and Big Death, are not just for funerals and Christology, but are essential for any word that sets out to offer life-giving hope.

The site of Powery's homiletical inspiration is located primarily in two sources that have been a great means of hope in countless African American churches in the midst of painful suffering and death. The first reservoir for homiletics is the Spirituals. Powery makes the case that the Spirituals in essence are sung sermons that provide hope at the location of death. They offer a model for spiritual preaching which is sorely needed in our communities. The second location which provides the primary metaphor and model for spiritual preaching death and life for Powery is found in Ezekiel 37's popular narrative of "the Valley of Dry Bones." With the Spirituals and Ezekiel 37 at hand, we are called to, and reminded of, the need for a preaching ministry that has an intertwining encounter with spirit, death, and hope.

If you are seeking to more faithfully preach a word of hope and more honestly engage the full depth of the gospel to people who are dying little deaths everyday and will face Big Death one day, then this book is for you. It is an excellent resource and ought to be on every shelf of those who are given the heavy responsibility of preaching gospel to our broken world.

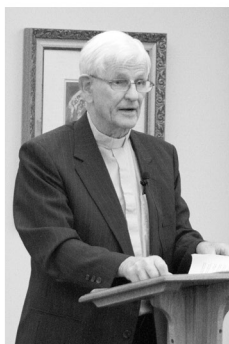
Drew Hart, PhD Student
Lutheran Theological Seminary
at Philadelphia

Hear global perspectives from LSTC alumni



“The Reformer, Biblical Women, and Other Asias,” Lutheran Heritage Lecture by the Rev. Dr. Monica Melanchthon, professor of Old Testament as a member of the United Faculty of Theology, MCD University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia

www.lstc.edu/voices/podcasts/2012-11-26-melanchthon.php



“Mission Duality – Both Giving and Receiving,” The Scherer Lecture by the Rev. Dr. Delbert Anderson, LCA missionary with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong 1959-69 and Program Director for East Asia 1970-1997 for LCA/ELCA Global Mission

www.lstc.edu/voices/podcasts/archives.php

Preaching Helps

Second Sunday after Pentecost–Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Turning Our "Ifs" to "Whens"

A great privilege of my work is that I sometimes hear a sermon that touches me deeply, which I wish others—you—could hear. Last semester, when Regina M. Herman preached in “Preaching the Gospel of John,” it occurred to me that, while you cannot hear this sermon, I can share a transcript with you. Thank you, Gina! I heard good news and experienced the gospel!

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (John 14:15–16). If you love me, you will keep my commandments. If...

Such a small little word and yet so powerful and packed with meaning. When we hear this little word today, so many feelings are aroused in us. There is the feeling of promise and hope: “If we can preach the gospel, we will empower others to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.” The feeling of anger and blame: “If she would have done her part in the group work, we could have had a better presentation and gotten a better grade!” The feeling of arrogance and pride: “If *I* would have been asked to lead chapel, I could have done a much better job!” The feeling of guilt and despair: “If I had only been at home when it happened, I could have stopped it.”

One of the big “ifs” I remember hearing most often growing up was, “If you go to college and get a degree, then you will be guaranteed a good job.” This hasn’t worked out so well for many graduates in recent years, including my brother and many of my friends whom I went to college with. Today, seminary doesn’t even provide this comfort.

We seem to be surrounded by these “if” statements, statements that can sometimes be good when they challenge us to do something more and give us hope, but can also be very dangerous and harmful when we *fail* to do something we feel obligated to do or *someone else* fails to do something we had expected of them.

And when we fail or someone else fails us these “if” statements lead to anxiety and “what if” questions, such as: What if I can’t preach the gospel or don’t preach the gospel? What if I don’t find a job within the next year? Two years? Three years? What if I’m *not* called to be a pastor or a professor?

We can *all* call to mind times when these kinds of “what if” questions haunted us. They place extra burdens on us that wear us down and cause us grief, pain, and despair, because they are surrounded by uncertainty. We don’t know the outcome of these statements and questions, and we are legitimately afraid of what that means for us.

And then we come to Jesus’ “if” statement for us today—“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” At first glance, it seems like Jesus is putting another burden on us. This statement seems like all of the others and our minds immediately

jump to: “So what if I can’t keep the commandments? Can I still love Jesus? Will Jesus still love me?”

But this statement is not like the others. This so-called “if” statement is not really an “if” statement at all. It is a “when” statement. A better translation would be “When you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Can you hear the difference? “*When* you love me, you *will* keep my commandments.” When we translate this “if” statement as a “when” statement, the uncertainty is taken away.

In this case, Jesus is expecting that we *will* love him. *Jesus* has faith in *us*. Jesus *believes* in us. This “when” statement falls into the same category as other hopeful, life-giving statements in John, masquerading as “if” statements in the English translation: “So *if* the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). “And *if* I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3).

These too are not really “if” statements, but “when” statements. Jesus knows that these things will happen and we can be confident as Christians that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son *does* make us free and *has already* gone and prepared a place for us.

These kinds of statements are so certain that one of the biggest of these pseudo “if” statements is now most often translated as a “when” statement: “And I, *when* I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). There is no question in Jesus’ mind as to what is about to happen. Jesus knows that he will be lifted up on the cross, through which he *will* conquer sin and death, giving the world a new sense of hope and life.

Still, as human beings, we have a problem. *These* hopeful, life-giving “when” statements are all about Jesus, who is *God*. But when we look at our “when” statement about loving Jesus and keeping Jesus’ commandments, it appears to be about us, and we fail and mess up all the time. How can Jesus be certain that we can keep the commandments and even dare to love others as he has loved us? There is no way we can live up to this expectation! And the fears and anxieties and “if” questions come crawling back.

However, our pseudo “if” statement for today is not entirely about us either. This one is about Jesus too, because immediately following this statement of “When you love me, you will keep my commandments,” Jesus tells us *exactly* how this too will be fulfilled—through the Advocate! Jesus promises to send us another Advocate. And as we quickly find out, this Advocate does much more than simply advocate on our behalf.

This being, this Paraclete, is one like Jesus—a Holy Spirit of truth, who with Jesus and the Father, will abide in us and make its home within us, who will continue to teach us the things of God, remind us of Jesus’ teachings and his great love for us, testify to the gospel with us and on our behalf, guide us, comfort us, and empower us to live out the gospel. And this Advocate, Jesus promises, will be with us forever!

Friends, Jesus is alive and continuing to work in and through us *now* through the power of the Advocate. Because of the Advocate, who empowers and encourages us *today*, both in the classroom and outside of it, we too are able to keep the commandments and love one another, without the anxiety and fear of so many of our “if” statements.

And when we fail, it does not mean that we don't love Jesus or that Jesus doesn't love us or that Jesus' Spirit will leave us or be taken from us...Because through Jesus' love and amazing grace, we are forgiven!

Out of God's great love for us flows the continuing work of Jesus through the Advocate, who turns all of our haunting "ifs" to "whens," who continues to guide us and encourage us, and who speaks peace and comfort to every anxiety and fear we struggle with, so that we can boldly go out and love one another with the very same love with which Jesus loves us.

"When you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Emily A. Carson, associate pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Stewartville, Minnesota, leads us into the Sundays after Pentecost. Pastor Carson describes herself as blogger, photographer, sister, daughter, and friend. She writes a weekly column in the Rochester *Post-Bulletin*. Iowa is Emily's true homeland, where she studied literature at Wartburg College. From 2005–2009, Emily attended the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago; during her senior year, Emily served as my assistant, a role for which I continue to be grateful.

I thank God for speaking through the voices of younger preachers, including Gina and Emily, and that I am privileged to hear them. Through them, God brings hope to the church, life to the world, and grace to my spirit.

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, "Preaching Helps"
www.craigasatterlee.com

Second Sunday after Pentecost June 2, 2013

1 Kings 18:20–21, 30–39

Psalms 96

Galatians 1:1–12

Luke 7:1–10

First Reading

The theme of religious loyalty is an undercurrent running through the readings for today. In the Old Testament reading, Elijah does his best to inspire the Israelites to stop being so inconsistent in their spiritual devotion. They are flip-flopping between Baal and Yahweh, and Elijah encourages them to make a final decision on the matter.

He asks, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions?” The Hebrew word translated as limping in 1 Kings 18:20 is *pacach*. It refers to being halted, dislocated, or wrenched. In this case, the people of Israel are being wrenched between the true God and Baal. Their inconsistent worship is literally dislocating their spiritual lives.

After Elijah performs a miracle that the prophets of Baal are unable to perform, the people are amazed. As direct witnesses of God’s power, their loyalty to Yahweh is strengthened (at least momentarily).

In the second reading, Paul wonders what on earth the people of Galatia are thinking. They have been swayed by other voices and opinions. Their loyalty to Christ seems to be confused.

The Gospel reading describes a centurion seeking out help from Jesus. As a Gentile centurion, the man hasn’t been raised with a traditional Jewish upbringing. And yet, his true spiritual loyalty seems clear. It is Jesus in whom he places his trust, even though he apparently has never even met him. Jesus willingly helps

heal the centurion’s servant, reminding us that Christ’s compassion crosses cultural and religious boundaries.

Pastoral Reflection

The people of Israel were confused. The people of Galatia were also confused. They were distracted. They were all torn between multiple allegiances. These are people we can all relate to. We all know what it feels like to be emotionally dislocated, torn between various entities vying for our time and energy. Oftentimes there are so many things clamoring for attention at the same time that our central focus, God, gets drowned out by the roar of all the rest.

I find Elijah’s words in 1 Kings 18:20 thought-provoking. It’s a bit like he’s saying, “How long will you people straddle the fence?” Sometimes in pastoral ministry, I feel like that’s exactly what I do. I remain wishy-washy on social and congregational issues, trying to please everyone. Then I wonder, “Who are my real loyalties to?” The congregation members who contribute to my salary or Jesus?

The people of our congregations face similar challenges every single day. They, too, wonder where to place their attention and loyalty. A spouse? A boss? Co-workers? Parents? Children? Today’s readings give us an occasion to pause and consider the theme of religious loyalty. These readings are more than an opportunity to cajole everyone in the congregation into promising to be loyal to God forever. Instead, these readings are an opportunity to assure all those gathered that it is God’s love for us which is most loyal and consistent.

The reality is that we face individual choices every day that afford us the opportunity to put God first. And in the midst of those daily choices, we screw up most of the time. Yet God remains

loyal, consistent, and loving. God makes promises to us in the midst of our baptisms and then never turns back.

This is the route I plan to go with the readings for today. I plan to proclaim that although our allegiances, like those of the people of Israel, are often swayed, pulled, and dislocated, Jesus remains loyal and loving to all of God's children. He helped the centurion, and he helps us. Again and again, Christ comes to us with encouragement and patience. God knows us by name and we are his. Nothing we can do can separate us from God's love and loyalty. EAC

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 9, 2013

1 Kings 17:8–16
Psalm 146
Galatians 1:11–24
Luke 7:11–17

First Reading

Both Elijah and Jesus find themselves at the margins in today's Old Testament and Gospel readings. In fact, both readings literally take place at the city gate. City gates represent isolation, a borderland between insiders and outsiders. God sends Elijah to Zarephath, a Phoenician territory. Jesus travels to Nain.

In the Old Testament reading, it is worth noting that the story of Elijah and the widow progresses beyond verse 16, where our assigned pericope ends. During the optional portion of the reading (verses 17–24), the widow's son becomes sick and Elijah heals him. Depending on which preaching route you choose, it may be beneficial to read all the way through verse 24.

Elijah invites the woman to play an

active role of service in the Old Testament reading. He asks her to bring him some water and a little bread. She obliges even though she doesn't have much at all to share. In the Gospel reading, Jesus doesn't invite anything at all from the woman. The mercy and grace he extends is completely surprising and unexpected. Neither woman asks for help, and yet God blesses them both. The widow of Zarephath receives an ongoing amount of food and oil. In the later portion of the reading, she also receives the gift of her son's health. The widow of Nain gets her dead son back.

Physical touch plays a role in both the extended 1 Kings reading and the Lukan reading. The Greek term translated "touched" in Luke 7:14 is *haptomai* which means to fasten oneself to, to cling to, and to take hold of. In the Old Testament reading, Elijah literally stretches out over the child, pleading and praying with God for healing. Jesus and Elijah do more than extend a quick high-five or pat on the back. They come into full contact with human brokenness and they don't turn away.

The Galatians reading doesn't share the same theme. Instead, this reading reveals a persistent Paul attempting to use his own faith story to prove to the Galatian church that he's legitimate. He went from persecutor of Christians to leading apostle. At this early point in the letter to the believers in Galatia, Paul tries desperately to make the case that the people should trust him and tune out all the voices leading them astray.

Pastoral Reflection

For this week, I will focus on the reality that God meets us in the midst of our human vulnerability. God reaches out to us during our most vulnerable moments. These readings provide a perfect

opportunity to convey that God doesn't turn away from brokenness but instead actually turns toward it. And God doesn't just look at our brokenness. God touches it and heals it.

I hope to explore the image of the city gate in the context of these readings. I plan to incorporate artwork of city gates and maybe even create a gate of some kind that would sit at the entrance of the sanctuary. It would also perhaps be meaningful to preach from a different location, a space more "at the margins" of the worship space. The city gate in both readings represents more than a physical structure. The gate represents sadness, despair, brokenness, and isolation. Jesus meets us at the gated areas of our lives and stretches out a hand of love and acceptance.

Teaching confirmation classes to 50 seventh and eighth graders every week is one of my favorite aspects of my current setting. They teach me a lot about bravery, vulnerability, and compassion. They also love to act out skits of Bible stories. I can definitely imagine a few of them standing in front of the congregation to act out either the Old Testament or the Gospel reading for this week. If that feels appropriate or possible in your context, go for it. These stories are both so powerful; a visual might be helpful as a means of helping parishioners fully grasp what's happening in these readings.

It's interesting to approach these two readings from an individual prospective and also from a communal prospective. In what ways do we allow ourselves as congregations to be vulnerable? How do we welcome those who linger at the gate (i.e., sit alone during coffee hour or avoid it altogether)? These are all thoughts to explore during a sermon for this week. EAC

Fourth Sunday in Pentecost June 16, 2013

1 Kings 21:1–21a

Psalm 5:1–8

Galatians 2:15–21

Luke 7:36–8:3

First Reading

The Old Testament reading and the Gospel lesson for this week give us two opposing examples of how to use power. Ahab and Jezebel use their power irresponsibly while the women of Luke's gospel lesson use their financial power in affirming ways, contributing to Jesus' ministry.

In the Galatians reading, Paul articulates that Jesus lives not only outside of us but also within us. It's an empowering image that encourages us all to use our power and means responsibly, trusting Jesus to be our guide.

Without personally knowing him, I don't know quite what to say about Ahab. It seems pretty easy to go with the standard "Ahab and Jezebel are heinous jerks" approach. They clearly take advantage of people. They are power crazy and inconsiderate. Ahab and Jezebel are apparently so desperate to plant a vegetable garden that Ahab has poor Naboth stoned to death in order to get his vineyard. It seems irrational, over-the-top, and awful, and it is.

But if we only think of this reading in terms of how awful Ahab and Jezebel are, we get off too easy. Looking at the reading only through that lens allows most of us to remain far too comfortable. The reality is that many of us stand on the side of the powerful (especially from a global perspective). In general, we have more than enough resources, and we don't necessarily consider where those

resources come from or who gets hurt along the way. Maybe Ahab and Jezebel really are jerks, but there's got to be more to learn from the reading than that.

Was Ahab born a terrible human? Probably not. Did power corrupt him? Probably so.

There is a lot of danger in power that goes unchecked.

There are a variety of routes to travel with the reading from Luke. For the route I'm taking, I'll focus on the last few verses of the pericope, in which we briefly learn about people (perhaps all female) who are using their power and resources to support the ministry of Jesus. We don't know a lot of details about how these folks provided for Jesus' ministry, but we know they did.

If you choose to focus more on the earlier section of the Gospel reading, it is also possible to tie in those verses to this overall theme of "responsible use of power." The woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and hair is described in this section. The Pharisees are disgusted, but Jesus feels differently. He affirms her. She was someone with very little financial or social power, and yet she uses the influence she does have to make an important statement: Jesus deserves great displays of hospitality and love. Her example reminds us all that regardless of how much authority we think we have, there are always ways to affirm what we believe and stand for.

Pastoral Reflection

Questions regarding the responsible use of power and resources are important to raise up when possible. In many ways, these are stewardship issues. How do we faithfully use what God has entrusted to us? I think today's readings provide a great opportunity to talk about how we work together to provide for one another as a community and a world.

As a preacher, this may be a good

week to consider one or all of the following questions in your sermon:

- How do we share power as a family of faith?
- How are decisions made within this congregation?
- How do we invite the voices and perspectives of people on the margins?
- How might we find encouragement from biblical examples where resources are shared in responsible, compassionate ways?
- How, where, and why are we sharing our resources? (This might be a good time to clearly name the various camps, non-profits, and other organizations served by congregational dollars.)

The women mentioned in our gospel reading seem unafraid of sharing resources. This is worthy of note, as many of us are petrified of running out of what we have. Many homes are filled with hoards of food, clothing, and other random gadgetry and collectibles. We all want to feel secure, and sometimes having lots of "stuff" temporarily helps us to feel just that. But real security doesn't come from the hoarding of resources. It comes from having the freedom to share them.

Why was it that the women mentioned in Luke's gospel were so unafraid to share and minister? What was it that inspired the woman to wash and kiss Jesus' feet in such a bold, public way? We have wonderful models of faithful people sharing all they have and all they are both in the Bible and in our congregations. Why do they do it? Because they know that everything first and foremost belongs to God.

Ahab didn't think about his resources in the same way. He thought everything belonged to him, and that attitude got him into a lot of trouble.

With Old Testament lessons like today's reading, it can be easy to focus on the "bad" guys and their bad choices. But then what? If we end there, I doubt anyone will be very convinced to change any behaviors and stewardship attitudes. Instead, how about taking time to also lift up a few biblical examples of people sharing power and resources with a spirit of joy? I believe most folks are generally more persuaded by good examples than by bad ones, and today's Bible readings offer a good mix of both. EAC

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

June 23, 2013

1 Kings 19:1–15a

Psalms 42–43

Galatians 3:23–29

Luke 8:26–39

First Reading

The voice and presence of God take many forms. In our first reading, God's voice is a whisper. In our Gospel reading, Jesus confronts a legion of demons, commanding them to leave a man. Sometimes God's presence enters our lives quietly and persistently, like the trickle of a leaky faucet. Other times, the Creator's presence crashes into our world like thunder and lightning.

Elijah is extremely frightened in the Old Testament reading and understandably so. He's scared because Jezebel wants him dead. So Elijah is forced to leave it all behind and head out on the open road. Looking for a place to hide, he finds a broom tree. In the midst of that, God gives him strength and encouragement. God provides him with food, drink, and sleep. We might expect God's voice to always sound like a loud boom from the thunderous clouds and be very deep and

manly, but that is not the case in this reading. Instead, the Creator's voice comes to Elijah in the silence, translated *daq demamah* in 1 Kings 19:12. God speaks to Elijah in a tiny (almost silent) whisper.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus boldly enters into one man's experience of total isolation. The demon-possessed man was someone everyone had been neglecting. The reading mentions that he has been living in a possessed chaos for "a long time" without a home or even clothes. He lives in a graveyard and is a complete and utter outcast.

Jesus comes to him with love and concern. The man doesn't seek out Jesus. Instead, Jesus seeks out the man. There is no way that the man expects Jesus to come. And yet he does. Jesus enters into the man's broken, awful existence not with a spirit of judgment or condemnation. Instead, all he wants to do is find a way to heal the man and set him free from the isolation he's been living in for far too long.

In the Galatians reading, Paul focuses on the theme of unity. This focus is a bit different from the other two readings, so I won't spend as much time on it here. However, this may well be a great reading to zero-in on if you serve in a context where divisions and conflicts are at play.

Pastoral Reflection

God speaks to us and enters our lives in a multitude of ways. This is refreshing good news for life today. It frees us from the limited perspective that God only speaks in certain ways to certain groups of people. Today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons are a celebration of God's eternal presence: both in quiet forms and in bolder, louder forms.

Elijah is clearly in danger in the first reading. In the turmoil and fear he is experiencing, God provides. It reminds me of *The Hunger Games*, one of my favorite

books of all time (yes, I jumped on the bandwagon and enjoyed the whole ride).

Katniss is the main female character. She is scared and fighting to stay alive amid complete chaos. As she makes her way through various challenges, something amazing starts to happen. When she needs help the most, it miraculously arrives. “Sponsors” provide medicine, water, and food for her, and it comes down from the sky via a parachute. Katniss perseveres, not only because she has the physical nourishment she needs but also because the physical helps were reminders that she isn’t alone. There are people who cared about her and are watching out for her.

Elijah and the tomb man both need to be reminded that they aren’t alone either. God is with them and won’t ever leave them.

God meets us wherever we are, and then speaks to us in whatever way is deemed most helpful and appropriate. Knowing that the Holy Spirit will enter into all the circumstances we might encounter, God invites us to be ready. We might experience the Creator’s presence in the silence of a car ride. We might experience the Creator’s presence in a stadium full of people at a Vikings game. God will always show up. We never have to fear being alone because God will never leave. That’s my good news for this week. EAC

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost **June 30, 2013**

2 Kings: 2:1–2, 6–14

Psalms 77:1–2, 11–20

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Luke 9:51–62

First Reading

The Holy Spirit empowers us to move forward, giving us spiritual gifts all along

the way. That message is at the core of our readings for today. In our reading from 2 Kings, Elisha is afraid to move forward without Elijah. In the Gospel reading, the followers of Jesus are afraid to move forward without sharing a proper, extended farewell with their loved ones. In the reading from Galatians, Paul invites the people to live by the Spirit and not get stuck in any negative behaviors.

The story of Elisha and Elijah has some very relatable elements. Elisha loves Elijah, his mentor. Elijah had paved the way! Elisha can’t stand the thought of life without him. When Elijah tells Elisha that God is coming for him and it’s time to go, Elisha boldly says, “I will not leave you” (2 Kings 2:2). In fact, he says it multiple times. He has major separation anxiety. They’ve really been through a lot together. No wonder Elisha wants to continue on two-by-two. But eventually the chariot comes and Elijah is gone.

After Elijah is taken up into heaven, Elisha is left alone. He is devastated and rips his clothes into pieces. Then he calls out, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” There are moments when even biblical prophets wonder whether God is altogether absent.

The Gospel reading isn’t an easy one. Jesus is speaking with some of his followers. They just want to check in on a few more things at home before following him. But Jesus commands them to stop looking back. He wants them to start looking ahead instead. We have a clue as to why Jesus takes such a strong stance on this issue in Luke 9:51 which states, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” Jesus knows that his time is limited and he has a lot of ministry left to do. He doesn’t want the people to miss out on this important chapter.

Pastoral Reflection

The ability to “let go” and move forward is no easy task. It’s one that we all are faced with at various points in life: a relational separation, a child leaving for school, the death of a parent, a career change. Today’s readings remind us that even in life’s transitions, we are freed from the need to get stuck in the past. We have the freedom to keep moving forward.

There’s a song by Frou Frou that’s featured in one of my favorite movies, *Garden State*. The name of the song is “Let Go.” The lead male character, Andrew, and female character, Sam, face a decision at the end of the movie. Will he get on the plane? Or will he choose to stay with her, even though they have no idea how it will work out?

They decide to go for it and move ahead together hand-in-hand, come what may. In the last line of the movie, Andrew says, “So what do we do? What do we do?” And then the song starts and the credits role. Part of the chorus of the song goes: “So let go, let go, and jump in. What are you waiting for? It’s alright, because there’s beauty in the breakdown.”

“What are you waiting for?” might make a nice refrain for a sermon.

What is Elisha waiting for? What is he afraid of? Maybe he is overwhelmed at the idea of stepping into such an important leadership role. That’s definitely relatable. Maybe he doubts his own abilities. That’s also relatable. Or maybe he is just really sad because he misses Elijah, and grief stinks.

What are those early followers of Jesus waiting for? Do they really want to just wait around for their loved ones to die? Perhaps they are using that as an excuse to avoid taking a risk and following Christ. Risks really can be scary, so their fears are understandable.

We can carry this refrain through the biblical narratives and into life today. People of God, what are we waiting for?

What’s keeping us stuck as a congregation? What are we afraid of? How do we use our freedom in Christ to move forward? Having true freedom in Christ gives us courage to move forward. This week’s readings provide ample material to work with as we craft a sermon on letting go and moving ahead. EAC

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 7, 2013

2 Kings 5:1–14

Psalm 30

Galatians 6:7–16

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20

First Reading

Today’s readings invite us to think about our attitudes. They also provide an opportunity to ponder what it means to rejoice in God’s work and not our own human activity.

In the reading from 2 Kings, a powerful military man, Naaman, gets healed of a skin disorder. Elisha facilitates the process, but Naaman is skeptical and frustrated all along the way. He’s pretty dramatic about it all and wishes he could have a more direct encounter with the prophet. It’s the compassion of the young girl captive that paves the way for Elisha to help. She only gets about a half-verse worth of attention, but the detail is integral to the story. She’s a servant of Naaman’s wife. And yet in her humble, quiet kindness, she reaches out to help a man suffering with a skin disease.

The Galatians reading reminds us not to get weary in doing good but instead, to persevere in joy. Paul invites the people to have an attitude of humble service saying, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all” (Galatians 6:10).

In Luke, Jesus sends out a big crew of his followers to spread the good news. Much of his instruction to them before they leave is about the attitude they should carry with them. The first thing he invites them to say when they reach a new place is, "Peace to this house." He invites them to pack extremely light and to trust in the hospitality of those they will encounter.

When they all get back, they are so thrilled. They can cast out demons. And Jesus, too, is happy to hear about the great work that God did through them. But Jesus also carefully reminds them not to rejoice because of all their newfound power. Instead, they are invited to rejoice because their names are written in heaven. Jesus wants them to remain humble about the power they have so they can remember that the roots of that power are in God. They are participants in a larger story. It isn't about their individual feats, but instead, it is about what God is doing through them.

Pastoral Reflection

Humility is not necessarily a word we use often, but it's an underlying concept that bubbles up in today's readings. If approached in a spirit of care (and not criticism), I think it can make a great sermon focus. Today's readings invite us to think about where to place the spotlight in life. Do we place it on ourselves or on the work of the Holy Spirit? As a congregation, do we draw attention to our own good works or do we give direct praise to the Holy Spirit? As preachers, where do we shine the spotlight? On our own good sermons or on the Holy Spirit that inspires them? Most of the time, we all do a little of both. Thankfully, we worship a God of forgiveness and grace.

In the Thursday morning Bible study at the congregation I serve, we have been working our way through Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Not so surprisingly, I like it a lot more now than I did in seventh

grade. I think Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed has some good connections to this theme.

Luther explains the work of the Holy Spirit as follows: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." It's likely that some folks in the congregation aren't aware of this understanding of the Holy Spirit's work, so it might be valuable to incorporate it into worship or the sermon this week. It's a good opportunity to remember together that all goodness flows not from our individual fonts, but instead flows from the Holy Spirit. This is good news. It's freedom from a life of pressure and the obsessive need to do it all right.

Many congregations are tempted to be either very happy or very sad based on things like attendance numbers or financial giving. It's human nature. Today's Gospel lesson reminds us that it isn't about us. It's about God's work in the world. We are just called to be tools through which the Holy Spirit can work.

Don't get me wrong, I think it's wonderful to celebrate personal and congregational joys! Jesus just invites us to be sure to keep the central focus of our celebrations rooted in God's work, not our own. EAC

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 14, 2013

Amos 7:7–17

Psalms 82

Colossians 1:1–14

Luke 10:25–37

First Reading

What does it look like to be a good neighbor? Neighborliness plays an important

role in our readings this week. It's the priest Amaziah versus the prophet Amos in our first reading. They are living in the same community, but they don't see eye to eye. Amaziah is upset that Amos keeps preaching with a tone of judgment. Amos says something like, "Seriously!? Are you kidding me, Amaziah?! I didn't seek out this job of spokesperson for God. I was a shepherd. God called me into this life. Why can't you just listen and change your ways?"

Right before today's pericope, Amos has been pleading with God on behalf of the people, praying that God will suspend judgment for awhile longer. In his role as a prophet, Amos explores multiple models of what it means to be a neighbor. Sometimes he pleads for forgiveness on behalf of the people. Sometimes he shares words of judgment. To be a good neighbor is to be both: honest and helpful. As is often said, sometimes the truth hurts.

And in Luke, we hear the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. In this lesson, to be a neighbor is to help any person in need. The whole story that Jesus tells in this Gospel reading is an attempt to broadly expand his audience's understanding of what defines a neighbor. The Greek word that Jesus uses for being a neighbor is *plēsion*. To be a neighbor is to be a friend, irrespective of geographical or religious boundaries.

We enter into a new letter this week with Paul's letter to the brothers and sisters of Colossae. His tone is certainly one of true encouragement. Sharing words of honest encouragement is another part of what it means to be a good neighbor. Paul affirms the Colossians for their faith and the fruit they bear.

Pastoral Reflection

This week I plan to explore a contemporary understanding of what it means to be a neighbor. Our readings provide

multiple examples of neighborly behavior. On the one hand, our Gospel defines a neighbor as one who provides physical help in the midst of turmoil. A case could be made that our Old Testament lesson also reveals a kind of neighborly behavior: love expressed through honest, truthful, challenging words.

It's hard to approach this topic without hearing Mr. Rogers in my head singing, "Won't you be my neighbor?" Maybe that would make for a fun starting point for a sermon for today. Run a video clip or pipe in the audio to that song. Put the lyrics in the bulletin. It's a familiar tune to most. Maybe everyone could sing it as the sermon's introduction. It's especially interesting to think of Jesus as the one singing to us, saying, "I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you/I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you." Jesus loves us, welcomes us, and invites us to live as neighbors within this global community.

In the meat of the sermons we create for this week, we will need to branch off and personalize to make the content relevant for our individual contexts. What does it look like to be a neighbor on a floor of individual cubicles at work? What does it look like to be a neighbor in an urban environment? What does it look like to be a neighbor in small town Minnesota? There are overarching qualities that span across all these environments, but being a neighbor is also contextual.

In the Amos reading, Amaziah comes face to face with the inadequacies and misbehaviors of all the people. And he can't handle it. He "can't handle the truth" to quote Jack Nicholson from the film *A Few Good Men*. Sometimes the truth feels like too much to bear because it requires being vulnerable and open to change.

What do we do when we come face-to-face with our own inadequacies?

When loving friends come to us with a challenging, honest word spoken in love, it can be hard. But don't we want our neighbors to do more than provide us with fluffy comfort?

Underneath the various layers of an exploration of neighborliness, it will be integral to bring the focus back on Jesus: neighbor to all. His love knows no boundaries. His compassion is for all. He reaches out to everyone. But he also speaks a hard word of truth when necessary. He is more than the perfect model of a neighbor, he is also a Savior. And while it is meaningful to explore our own individual and communal patterns of neighborliness, at the end of the day, what's most important is the True Neighbor who invites us all into community with Him. EAC

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost July 21, 2013

Amos 8:1–12

Psalms 52

Colossians 1:15–28

Luke 10:38–42

First Reading

Today's readings from Amos and Luke reveal the dangers of living a distracted life. God tells the prophet Amos that the people are out of control. They are in need of a major refocusing of their lifestyles and priorities. The people are trampling on the already downtrodden. They are taking advantage of others and care only about getting more and more. They are thoughtless, careless, and greedy. The words of our Old Testament reading have a strong bent toward judgment, reminding readers that God takes oppression of the poor seriously.

In the Gospel reading, we catch Mary and Martha in a bit of a sisters' quarrel.

Martha is distracted in verse 40, and who can't relate to that? The Greek term for Martha's emotional state is *perispaō*. She is drawn away, busy, over-occupied, and even worried. This is a good insight as oftentimes our own busyness has a bit of worry mixed in, too.

What is Martha so stressed about? Well, Jesus is in her house and she wants to be a great hostess. Jesus looks past her running around, moving about from place to place completing various tasks. He sees something deeper going on, and he speaks right into her deep emotional state, saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, there is need of only one thing." Jesus sees beyond the fretting about, and he addresses the deeper anxiety Martha is experiencing. He invites her to let all that go so that she can refocus on the present moment. Time is the greatest gift they have to share together, and Jesus doesn't want Martha to miss out.

In our reading from Colossians, Paul shares a beautiful, hymn-like reading on the nature of Christ. Jesus is described as the image of God, firstborn of all creation, and head of the church. Christ reconciles us to himself and makes us holy and blameless. This is a helpful connection to our other two readings. Even though we all get distracted and pulled in multiple directions, Jesus forgives us and empowers us to keep going.

Pastoral Reflection

We all know what it feels like to be distracted and preoccupied. Martha's story is our story, and that's where I plan to focus this week. Usually when this reading comes up, I mention about how bad I feel for Martha. She is just trying to do the right thing and be a good hostess. She welcomes Jesus into her home and then does what she can to be a help. I imagine her to be efficient, tidy, and intentional. She seems like the overachiever in the family tree. So

maybe she's a little Type A? She can't help it. We don't know for certain where she's at in the birth order with Mary and Lazarus, but I'm going to guess she's the firstborn.

But upon encountering the gospel this time, I realized something new. For their whole lives, it's probably always been Martha who had it all together. Martha: the A+ student. Mary: the daydreamer. Martha: the first one to volunteer to help. Mary: perhaps less interested in domestic pursuits.

When Jesus takes time to affirm Mary in today's lesson, it might well be the first time in a long time she's ever been on the receiving end of praise. And for what? For pausing long enough to recognize the presence of God in her midst. This isn't a lesson about how Mary is the compassionate, faithful sister and Martha is the distracted, know-it-all sister. They are both just human beings, trying to do their best. Jesus cares deeply for them both. On this particular day, Mary is aware of God's presence and she doesn't want to miss out on it. She probably doesn't want her sister to miss out on it either.

Maybe when Martha was saying, "Mary, get in here and help me!" Mary was saying, "Martha, don't worry about all that. We can just order some pizza. Jesus won't mind. Just come and sit down with us." Martha is a great lady. She just needs a gentle reminder to refocus. Who doesn't? I sure do!

These days there are so many reality cooking shows on television. It's amazing to see just how much people can cook in 15 minutes. There are other timed reality shows, too. How fast can you rebuild a home? How fast can you lose 100 pounds? Our pace seems to be moving faster and faster and faster. Today's Bible readings invite us to pause and refocus. It isn't necessarily bad to be efficient and move quickly. But it is truly tragic when our

rapid pace leads us to miss out on sacred encounters with God.

Thankfully, even when we get it wrong, Jesus remains our permanent spiritual houseguest. Even when we are distracted, his presence is promised eternally. Thanks be to God. EAC

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost July 28, 2013

Hosea 1:2–10

Psalms 85

Colossians 2:6–15

Luke 11:1–13

First Reading

At the core of our readings for today, we meet a God who is determined to interact with us in a personal way. It does take some unpacking of the lessons to reach that conclusion. Here are a few of my initial thoughts on the readings.

Even after studying it and hearing some great sermons on it, Hosea remains a challenging book of the Bible for me. There are so many negative female stereotypes in this biblical book. Also, it's tough to understand exactly why God invites Hosea to give his kids awful names with terrible meanings. But in the end, Hosea is a book that reveals a God who cares about people deeply and personally—and doesn't easily give up. Our lesson for today is from the very beginning of the book. If you choose to preach on this reading, it will be important to discuss the use of metaphor throughout the book. Hosea's relationship with Gomer is a metaphor for God's relationship with the people of Israel. It is also helpful to note that in the course of the book, the pendulum swings back and forth between hope and despair.

The Colossians reading invites us to live in Christ. Paul says, "Continue to live your

lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith.” The image of being rooted in Jesus is a helpful one to expand upon. The Greek verb for being rooted is *rhizōō*. This word describes the process of becoming thoroughly grounded with deep roots. These strong, stabilizing roots are what Jesus wants for his followers. The lesson from Colossians exposes that our connection to Jesus is personal. He isn’t removed from our daily lives. Instead, we are invited to plant our roots directly in him!

In the Gospel lesson, we hear the original version of the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus teaches it to some of his disciples. The prayer reminds us that we have a direct communication line and we can use it anytime. After Jesus teaches the disciples the prayer, he tells them a story about a persistent man whose persistence pays off. The concluding section of the reading invites us to ask, search, and knock. These are active words exemplifying an active faith. God is keenly attuned to our requests, and we always have the freedom and invitation to communicate.

Pastoral Reflection

For many people on a Sunday morning, God seems extremely distant. On any given Sunday, people are dealing with so much that we as the preachers are probably unaware of: addiction, depression, divorce, single parenting, medical concerns. Today’s readings are a reminder that God is not far off. Instead, God is near and ready to interact, even if we can’t always feel it. The personal nature of God will be my focus for this week’s readings.

Most of us have encountered the “Footprints in the Sand” poem. It’s a brief reading in which a man describes having a dream of walking on the beach with God. When the man looks back there are sometimes two sets of footprints. Other times there is only one set of footprints. The man asks

God why God left when he needed him the most. God tells the man that actually, the times when there was only one set of footprints, God was carrying him.

There came a time when I had seen and heard this poem so much that I started to resent it and think it was too cheesy and cliché. But then, when I entered into pastoral life, I started doing regular home and care center visits. I constantly notice “Footprints” in people’s homes: in their bathrooms, kitchens, and living rooms. It shows up on wall hangings and magnets. “Footprints” is everywhere (although interestingly, I discovered its original author remains uncertain).

So why is it that this one particular poem remains so popular and loved? Perhaps it is because it describes a God who is so fully present and near! “Footprints” provides an image of God that makes sense to people. It describes a God whose love is big enough that he’s willing to carry us through life’s toughest chapters.

I believe our challenge as preachers is to continue providing images of God that make sense to people, images that they can hold on to and put on their refrigerators and wall-hangings. The actual reading of the Bible provides ample imagery. The Gospel reading mentions that our heavenly Father is like a loving parent ready to give good gifts. The Old Testament reading describes God as a faithful, persistent spouse.

For this week’s sermon, I hope to go on an excavation, both inside and outside of the Bible. I will be on the lookout for images and stories that clearly portray God’s ever-present closeness to us. Perhaps a newspaper clipping from that week or a personal story that someone in the congregation might be willing to share. God is near and this week provides a time to explore just how close our Creator really is. EAC



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