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Mark W. Thomsen: Remembering the Missiologist and the Man

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From the editors

Dear *Currents* Subscriber:

For several months the editorial team of *Currents in Theology and Mission* has been discussing an exciting new possibility related to the future of *Currents*. We have come to the decision that the time is right for *Currents* to become a fully online, open access journal. While this means that beginning in 2016 *Currents* no longer will appear as a printed journal, it also offers many advantages. The journal will become free of charge for our loyal subscribers, while at the same time opening up the contents of our established publication to a whole new world of readers across the globe. Moreover, this new mode of delivery makes the production of *Currents* financially sustainable in an unprecedented way. We send you this letter because we want to give our readers ample notice of the change that will take place a year from now.

We especially thank you, our loyal readers over the years, for subscribing to *Currents* and ask your continued support and readership as we move to our new format in 2016. We pledge to you our continued commitment to deliver a quality theological journal in support of the ministry and mission of the church as it responds to the ever-changing signs of the times. This new opportunity expands the outreach of *Currents in Theology and Mission* in exciting ways. Open access means that anyone, anywhere in the world, will be able to become readers and students of our journal.

We will continue to publish *Currents* in its print format through 2015, in order to give our readers ample time to be informed about how to access the journal in the future and to honor subscriptions already purchased. We gladly will accept one-year subscriptions for 2015, but urge our readers not to extend their subscriptions beyond 2015. If there is any money to be refunded, we certainly will do this upon request, even while allowing readers the opportunity to contribute any remaining amount to support the future of *Currents*.

Starting in 2016 we will publish the journal quarterly (four issues per year) in January, April, July, and October. The *Currents* staff, including Barbara Lundblad, the new editor of Preaching Helps, is working to ensure that the lectionary-based preaching commentaries (together with the other articles on timely issues facing the church) will appear well in advance of when readers may desire to use these particular resources. During 2015 we will begin to shift into this new schedule by publishing five issues in 2015 before moving to four issues per year in 2016.

In future issues we will provide readers ample information about how to easily access *Currents* in its new online format. In the meantime, we look forward to your continued readership and support as we move into the future together.

Kathleen D. Billman, S.D. Giere, Craig L. Nessan

Mark W. Thomsen: Remembering the Missiologist and the Man

January 20, 2015, marks the one-year commemoration of the death of Mark W. Thomsen, Lutheran professor, theologian, administrator, missiologist, pastor, husband, father, grandfather, and friend. Thus, it is fitting that this edition of *Currents in Theology and Mission* has been commissioned to reflect on the life and work of Mark Thomsen, and his impact on the church. To this end, the collection of articles in this volume review Thomsen's theological views, his role as Executive Director of the American Lutheran Church's (ALC) Division for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation and the Global Mission unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and as teacher of interfaith dialogue at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC).

Bonnie Jensen, the former Executive Director of the ELCA Division for Global Mission (1996–2004), begins this edition with the sermon she preached for Thomsen's funeral on February 15, 2014, at Hope Lutheran Church, Wautoma, Wisconsin. **Paul T. Jersild**, a longtime colleague and friend, reviews Mark Thomsen's theology, shaped by his missionary calling and deep engagement with people of other faiths. Jersild notes that for Thomsen, Jesus Christ as the man for others and ultimately the Cosmic Crucified is the embodiment of God's suffering love which embraces human history and indeed all of creation. **Michael T. Shelley** follows this with a reflection on Thomsen as a theologian of the cross. Here, Shelley notes that Thomsen believed that the cross could be explained as "costly grace and merciful justice."

The next three articles in this volume recall Thomsen's impact as both administrator and teacher of the church. **Harold Vogelaar** recalls Thomsen's role in his focus on Islam, and the development of ALC, Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and ELCA mission in the Middle East from the 1970s to the 1990s. Vogelaar notes the influence and impact of Thomsen on the role of the ELCA in the Middle East. **Carol Schersten LaHurd** reviews her work with Thomsen at the ELCA's annual missionary conferences and study programs, and in LSTC's Religions in Dialogue course. It was Thomsen's vision for a global mission shaped by the cross of Christ that was deeply respectful of diverse religious traditions that influenced the author's journey to religious pluralism. LaHurd also includes reflections from Thomsen's former interfaith interlocutor's Sevan Ross and Ghulam-Haider Aasi. In the next article, **Nelly van Doorn-Harder** recalls her journey from the Netherlands; to Cairo, Egypt; to Minnesota; to Yogyakarta, Indonesia; and back to the United States, where

she engaged in interfaith living and dialogue. She notes the important interfaith work done in collaboration with several Christian and Muslim institutions that have engaged and encouraged positive interfaith encounter in Indonesia.

The final two articles demonstrate Thomsen's ongoing influence on the Lutheran church through two authors directly impacted by his "Focus on Islam" in global mission. **Mark N. Swanson** examines the Lutheran paradox of the hidden/revealed God from the "cry of dereliction" from the cross. Here he connects Thomsen's central themes with his own work in the corpus of Christian Arabic theological literature. Finally, **David D. Grafton** provides theological, sociological, and pastoral rationale for engaging in conversation with Muslims as vital to ministerial training not only for those interested in a global mission, but also for those serving within the North American context.

All of the authors of this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* have demonstrated, through their articles here or in private correspondence, how deeply Mark W. Thomsen had touched them or impacted their work. Faced with the responsibilities of guiding a church into global mission, Thomsen was committed to articulate faithfulness to the Cosmic Crucified, and how such faith should be reflected through activities, ministries, and commitments in a world often ruled by empires, guided by power, and human systems of oppression. We hope that this collection will stimulate further theological reflection and activity in the name of the one whom Thomsen calls the "suffering with us God."

David D. Grafton
Guest Editor

Mark Thomsen and God's Cruciformed Mission

Bonnie Jensen

Former Executive Director of the Division for Global Mission, ELCA "In Memory" preached at the Worship Celebration on February 15, 2014, at Hope Lutheran Church, Wautoma, Wisconsin.

Mark Thomsen was a football star at Dana College, a wing back who scored 93 points in his sophomore year. What a glorious year! In the first game of his junior year, he broke his leg and was out for the season. Back for the first game in his senior year, he broke his collarbone! Again, he was out for the season. Obviously, Mark's life was bound to be more than football, and Mary Lou was not destined to be a coach's wife. Mark came to believe God was calling him in a new direction. This call to Mark came, not in glory, but in disappointment: broken bones, and the death of his personal dreams. Mark's life had already been marked by suffering and tragedy at the age of 10 when his young mother died. It is not surprising then that the cross of Jesus and God's presence in suffering and death came to take center place in his life and his evolving vision of God's *cruciformed mission*. This vision culminated with his book in 2004, *The Cruciformed Christ: A 21st-Century Missiology of the Cross.*

Mark was a follower of Jesus: marked by the cross. His early experiences surely made him a compassionate man who listened, and who felt deep sympathy for people burdened with troubles and suffering. He was complicated, yet humble. He was brilliant, even intimidating. He was tenderhearted, combative, generous, aggressive, and courageous. He was a dreamer. He was a radical.

Mark lived with relentless energy, and so his death shocks us. Those of his generation expected he would outlive us. Former Bishop of the American Lutheran Church, David Preus, wrote, "Mark's vitality was such that one did not think of death and Mark at the same time."

Mary Lou willingly followed her own calling as she and Mark boarded the cargo ship to Nigeria in 1957. It was an era of great historical change. Five centuries of European colonialism were giving way to the birth of new nations around the world including Nigeria in 1960. The dominance of the Western missionary movement was giving way to organizing independent national churches with their own leaders including the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria in 1956.

Mark was plunged into teaching and training Nigerian pastors. He continued that endeavor throughout his professional life: equipping church leaders for mission in their own countries. He also taught our church to get out of the driver's seat and share mission mutually, interdependently. Mark led with a vision to transform our colonial behaviors into mission in the way of the cross, in the way of the crucified Jesus. This manifested itself in his book, *The Word and Way of the Cross* in 1993.

When Mark taught new missionaries going abroad, he would challenge them:

"Can you be an effective missionary today and also carry a United States passport? Can you work effectively among people in another country when you come from this rich powerful nation that stations armies around the world? Or, when you come into a young developing church from a rich influential church like the ELCA?" Then, he would turn to Phil 2:5–8.

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited; but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

He would continue: "Jesus emptied himself of all claims to equality with God, humbled himself, and became obedient even to the point of death. Can you take up your cross, lose your own life, and follow Jesus? Can you empty yourself of the power of nation, money, and education, and walk humbly with people in the way of Jesus?" To church members going on mission trips, he would ask, "Can you walk softly in that distant place? Can you travel and visit in the manner of the Cruciformed Christ?"

He recognized that God's cruciformed mission needs the gifts and perspectives of all the people of God.

To those preparing for conversations with Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus, Mark would ask, "Can you empty yourself of your presuppositions about their faith? Can you listen and encounter the beauty and truth in their religious faith and experiences of God. Can you be present with them in the mind and manner of Jesus?"

Mark was first of all a teacher and theologian. He spent over half his public ministry teaching in schools. He was beloved and admired from Nigeria to Chicago. As a mission executive, Mark led as teacher and thinker throughout the church, teaching thousands on campuses, at Global Mission Events, in conventions, and in congregations. Mark also sought out dozens of missionaries and international students, and secured funding for advanced degrees so that they could teach. Some are present with us today.

The Rev. Dr. Paul Wee, a colleague who served with The Lutheran World Federation leader, wrote, "Mark put a whole new face on the global mission enterprise…When few were talking about the rise of Islam, Mark was already producing materials to help the church respond to this new challenge."

As an administrator, he was a change agent. Mark often told a story to challenge us about a church convention in San Diego where he sat on the speaker's platform next to the Ethiopian guest, Pastor Francis Stephanos. As they sat looking out over the audience, Pastor Francis leaned over to Mark, "Where are the black people? It looks like you haven't been doing your mission work very well in your own country."

Mark never stood still for long. Traditionally, the world mission staff was almost exclusively former missionaries who were white, male, and clergy. He employed an increasingly diverse staff with growing numbers of women and people of color. One person Mark sought out was Dr.

Belletech Deressa, who grew up as a poor girl in western Ethiopia. In the Division for Global Mission, she set priorities and oversaw millions of dollars designated for hunger and development programs every year. Mark took many risks with people and it changed the way mission happened. He recognized that God's cruciformed mission needs the gifts and perspectives of all the people of God. Former ELCA Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom has written about Mark's management of the Global Mission unit: "In the early days of the life of the ELCA I had many things to worry about, many issues over which to lose some sleep but the Division for Global Mission was not one of them. I knew that important part of the church was in good hands."

Mark was impatient with injustice. Mark often told of a visit ELCA leaders made to the Zimbabwe countryside to observe the church's response to a horrific drought. For a whole day they saw hungry, thirsty people, dying in feeding camps set up on the parched earth. When they returned to the city, they drove by a golf course. Mark trembled with emotion when he said, "The golf course was covered with lush green grass, and the sprinklers were on! It was absurd after what we'd seen." The cruciformed mission of God demands water, food, and justice for everyone.

Mark was a strategic organizer**.** When we were challenged by Lutherans in South Africa and Namibia to join the movement against South Africa's apartheid system, Mark led the Global Mission unit, other church units, seminaries, colleges and congregations of the church to get involved. Every district of the church organized a committee. The Women of the ELCA of southern Wisconsin created such a stir that when a South African newspaper published a list of subversive organizations, the list included "Wisconsin Lutheran Women." Cruciformed mission believes in a merciful God who brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts those of low degree.

Mark spent his public ministry within the structure of the church. Yet he passionately believed the mission of the church is what happens in the daily lives and work of each member. It is the priesthood of believers, where 99 percent of priests spend 98 percent of their time outside the church building. For eight years at St. Peter in Dubuque, Mark was out of the church office with the priests in the community: at their jobs, in their homes, at school, in the hospital. When they gathered at church, Mark knew them all very well, their failure and successes, their disappointments and secrets.

One member, Larry Croghan, a high school basketball coach, reflected, "It always seemed that when I listened to Mark, his sermon had a personal connection to my life." Mark, the pastor, often said his role on Sunday was like being a coach, gathering the players in the huddle, and then sending them back into the game for the rest of the week. The fallen football star had not left the game after all. He taught and coached all his life.

On Mark's last Sunday at St. Peter, a visitor at the service observed, "The affection for Mark filled the sanctuary. The love for him was deeply felt. I've never seen so many grown men crying in church."

So here we are today, crying again because we have lost Mark William Thomsen. He was a dear, dear man and a powerful coach in our lives, a cruciformed servant of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark touched us with his abundant, infectious faith in the goodness and love of God. He would be moved by our sadness today and remind us that, when we cry, the God of Jesus cries with us. Today we remember Mark in gratitude, and entrust him into the arms of the merciful Mystery of the whole universe.

Christology in a Pluralistic World

Paul Jersild

Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary: Lenoir-Rhyne University, Columbia, S.C.

This opportunity to commemorate Mark W. Thomsen gives me particular pleasure for several reasons. The first is because of a long friendship that began during our student days at Dana College in Blair, Nebraska, where we were roommates. We both attended Trinity Theological Seminary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (UELC), which moved to the campus of Wartburg Seminary in 1956. From there we went our separate ways within the ministry of the church, but always managed to stay in touch.

Second, both of our fathers were pastors in the UELC, the church of Danish heritage that merged with much larger German and Norwegian churches in 1960 to form The American Lutheran Church. That common background gave us a religious heritage that was cherished by both of us during the course of our ministries. Our childhood church was marked by a deep piety rooted in the Inner Mission movement in Denmark, but it was characterized by a reserve typical of the Danish people.[1] One's faith was not "worn on one's sleeve," but it had a distinctive emotional element. It was marked by an earnestness that tended to focus more on the character of one's life than on the orthodoxy of one's beliefs. We both saw that spirit in the theologies of professors C. B. Larsen and T. I. Jensen, prominent members of the seminary faculty.[2] Trinity graduates typically resisted the kind of strict orthodoxy that was often found among their peers in other Lutheran churches.

Early Christology

Most of Thomsen's theological works have focused on Christology. Jesus Christ is at the center of the Christian faith, a truth that has loomed all the more importantly to him in light of his work on the mission field and continuing relations with adherents of other world religions, both on a personal and professional basis. He was a theologian who could admirably represent his church as a leader in its global outreach, emphasizing the centrality of Jesus Christ while also stressing the inclusive nature of the church's message. His adherence to the gospel was expressed in ways that certainly placed him within the church's orthodox tradition, while avoiding the exclusive claims that have marked much of orthodox theology. This characteristic of his theology was apparent from his earliest publications.

In his article, "The Lordship of Jesus and Secular Theology," Thomsen addresses the Christology of Paul van Buren, one of the secular theologians emerging in the 1960s who was associated at least indirectly

1. The Inner Mission began in 1853 as a pietistic movement advocating small-group devotions and lay preaching.

2. Both served as professors of systematic theology at Trinity Seminary. Theodor Ingval Jensen served as the Dean of Trinity Seminary from 1946–56, and the President from 1956–61.

with the "death of God" phenomenon.[3] In his book, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language,* van Buren avowed the lordship of Jesus apart from faith in God, a position that was challenged by Langdon Gilkey in his *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language.*[4] Gilkey claimed that secular theology is self-contradictory when it affirms the lordship of Christ because that confession assumes faith in God. Without that faith, secular theology relinquishes any claim to be a Christian theology. Van Buren, in contrast, argued that the picture of Jesus conveyed in the Gospel records, "the man for others" who is driven by the spirit of *agape,* has the power to grasp and claim any contemporary person. Thomsen agreed, saying that the man Jesus, because of what we know about his life as depicted in the Gospels, can be *experienced* as Lord. "To be loved and to love, to be accepted and to accept, to be forgiven and to forgive are of value in and of themselves… I am convinced with van Buren that it is in the story of Jesus that the Christian is grasped…."[5]

I believe this openness to what many of us in the 1960s and 1970s regarded as a questionable Christology reflects the influence of Herbert Braun, under whom Thomsen studied during his doctoral program at Northwestern University. While this openness characterizes the inclusiveness of his theology, it does not signify total agreement with van Buren. In another article, "The Lordship of Jesus and Theological Pluralism,"[6] Thomsen compares van Buren's position with that of Schubert Ogden in *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann,* concluding that Ogden's Christology is preferable to the empirical thinking of van Buren.[7] In contrast to both Bultmann and van Buren, Ogden affirms the "objective" reality of a God-revealing event in Jesus, in whom one actually confronts "the eternal Existence or Thou in whom all truth is grounded."[8]

In this article Thomsen also considers the Christology of the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg.[9] A distinctive feature of Pannenberg's Christology is his insistence on a historical ground for faith in Jesus, which he finds in the resurrection. He argues that both philosophical assumptions and historical facts demand recognition that death was not able to hold Jesus. Without this objective, historical basis, Pannenberg maintains that we could not recognize the Lordship of Jesus. Thomsen concludes that while he respects Pannenberg's argument and ultimately agrees with his conclusions, he finds it impossible to approach the Lordship of Christ from this perspective. Can one commit one's life for time and eternity upon the basis of "a neutral, nonvalue fact which at its very best is only highly prob-

3. Mark W. Thomsen, "The Lordship of Jesus and Secular Theology," *Religion in Life* 41 (Autumn, 1972), 374–383.

4. See Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) and Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

5. Op. cit., 376.

6. Mark W. Thomsen, "The Lordship of Jesus and Theological Pluralism," *Dialog* 11 (Spring, 1972), 125–132. Hereafter cited as "Pluralism."

7. Schubert Ogden, *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961).

8. *Christ without Myth,* 163 as cited in "Pluralism," 127.

9. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).

able and possibly only the most adequate interpretation of a series of events"?[10]

Thomsen finds the insights of van Buren and Ogden more persuasive, experiencing with van Buren "the self-authenticating claim and power of grace or love (*agape*)" in the story of Jesus, and being convinced with Ogden "that the claim of grace experienced in the story of Jesus is grounded in the Eternal Thou – in God."[11] While Pannenberg regards this approach as unacceptable, a mere grounding of faith in faith itself, Thomsen makes a valid point in a quote from Paul Tillich: "Exactly what can faith guarantee? The inevitable answer is that faith can guarantee only its own foundation, namely, the appearance of that reality which has created the faith."[12] It is precisely the experience of the believer in the encounter with Jesus, which leads to faith in the resurrected Christ.

These early articles on the lordship of Christ reflect a primary feature of Thomsen's Christology that carries throughout his writing. It is the impact of Jesus' life that is decisive: "In and through his story I find myself grasped by the self-authenticating claim and power of grace or love (Agape). The New Testament does portray Jesus as the man of grace; the man for others; the man free to love; the man driven by compassion, care, and concern; the man for whom life was a gift to be shared."[13] Only after experiencing these dimensions of the Lordship of Jesus does the Easter event bring a new and more comprehensive message, that this Jesus of Nazareth "was incredibly affirmed by the power which conquers death. The resurrection becomes God's cry from the beyond that death is not the last word…that love is in reality grounded in the Eternal."[14]

The person of Christ

Christology has been traditionally divided into the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thomsen's Christology concentrates on the work of Christ rather than focusing on the issues posed by the fourth- and fifth-century Trinitarian and Christological controversies. When he refers to that subject, it is always in light of what was happening in the life of Jesus without attempting to spell out the implications of those events for the person of Jesus. For example, he writes: "…the fact that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was raised also indicates that this particular life, message, and death are to be identified with the unique, decisive, and final activity of God. He is in some way uniquely *the* Son of God, a mystery which we cannot possibly comprehend."[15] This last sentence would indicate that probing into the nature of Christ is less than fruitful, attempting to intrude on what has to remain as mystery. It is the nature of what was *happening* in his life that makes Jesus who he is, which leads me to believe that for Thomsen the meaning of the incarnation is expressed in his words that characterize Jesus as the "concretization" of the suffering love of God.

Thus the direction of Thomsen's Christology is not one that begins with *who* Jesus is in terms of his humanity and divinity in order to validate or understand what was happening in his life, essentially a philosophical enterprise. Rather, it is being grasped by his life, his ministry and teaching, his crucifixion and resur-

10. "Pluralism," 130.

11. Ibid., 130, 131.

12. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 114 as cited in "Pluralism," 131, note 36.

13. "Pluralism," 130.

14. Ibid., 132.

15. Ibid.

rection that form the basis for coming to conclusions about who he is. Faith sees in him the "final activity" of God. To know Jesus is to encounter the "Eternal Thou," the Ultimate Mystery of life. That finality was understood in historical terms within the Jewish context, but with the transition into the Gentile world and the Hellenistic tradition, the paradigm shifted from a historical to a metaphysical context. Here there is no way of understanding ultimate truth in terms of historical fulfillment of prophetic promises. In a cultural world where Aristotle's God was far removed from history, change, and mortality, the issue was now whether the divine Being could be identified with human flesh, an "incarnation."

This metaphysical world shaped the fourth century debate leading to the formulations of the Nicene Creed. Followers of Athanasius maintained the fullness of divinity in Jesus against the followers of Arius, whose mythological view of transcendence placed the origin of Jesus in a realm that was closer to the earth, an "extended" version of divinity, so to speak, not really embodying the true and ultimate God. Within that philosophical context, the Athanasian position, says Thomsen, was rightly affirmed as orthodox. However, he does not see the fourth century world of metaphysics as carrying an absolute or final version of the church's Christology. Amidst the many and various ways in which the meaning of Jesus Christ has been articulated, Thomsen concludes that two points are critical: "1) The finality of Jesus Christ is to be maintained in our confession and mission. Jesus Christ the crucified and risen servant is the incarnation of God's presence and action in the world. 2) We are also aware…that this confession has taken many forms within the history and the traditions of the church. Again and again new situations and contexts call forth new confessions of the Christian faith."[16]

Thomsen elaborates on this assertion by noting that there is already a variety of Christological formulations to be found in the New Testament, and that "what is essential to the Christian faith is not particular Trinitarian statements, but the integral relationship between the story of Jesus and the story of God."[17] He maintains this conviction in an article where he specifically addresses the Christology of Nicaea.[18] He argues that the faith articulated in the Nicene Creed can be just as adequately expressed with symbols and concepts that reflect a different time and culture. In fact, no one set of concepts can claim superiority or an absolute status for all time. Every Christology reflects its cultural milieu and thus brings a relative character to its conceptual language. While this is a truth widely recognized in a postmodern age, Thomsen is understandably dubious about whether it has been integrated into the thinking of the church.

From the early chapters of the Book of Acts, he lifts up a Christology of the Spirit as an example of an alternative option to the language of Nicaea. While the Nicene Creed presents an ontological view of the meaning of Jesus, speaking of an incarnation which brings the second person of the Trinity—the pre-existent Son—down to earth, a Spirit Christology conveys the meaning of Jesus within a historical-teleological framework, claiming a divinely bestowed finality to his life as the long-expected Messiah. "Thus in non-incarnational terms, the primitive church proclaimed that God was uniquely

16. Mark W. Thomsen, *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2008), 129.

17. *Jesus,* 140.

18. Mark W. Thomsen, "A Christology of the Spirit and the Nicene Creed," *Dialog* 16 (Spring, 1977), 135–138.

present and decisively active in Jesus who had been designated 'the Christ.' This meant that Jesus was to the primitive church that one in whom was to be found the ultimate meaning of life and history, for in and through him God himself was personally present and decisively active within history."[19] Thus Thomsen moves "from below" rather than "from above," from the man Jesus to the confession that "God was in Christ…" (2 Cor 5:19).

The crucifixion now assumed an altogether new meaning that has challenged the believing community in every time and place to articulate, proclaim, and above all to live out in their own lives.

While preferring Spirit language to that of the Nicene Creed, Thomsen still sees the necessity of affirming what he calls a "fusion of ontological ultimacy with historical-teleological finality" in the church's confession. The Western church is a child of the Greek tradition, with ontological categories still deeply embedded in its theology. That language, while no longer maintaining the dominance it once had, still makes it necessary to speak of Jesus as divine—God incarnate. But the emphasis for Thomsen properly lies in the question, "Where, or in whom, do we find the unique, decisive and ultimate presence of God and His action?" This is the primary question, while the secondary question is, "How do we, as Christians, account for the fact that we believe that Jesus is the answer to that ultimate question?"[20] To that secondary but still "extremely significant question," Thomsen beckons the non-believer to "come and see."

Jesus, "the Cosmic Crucified"

The expression in Thomsen's Christology that particularly captures the meaning of Jesus is "the Cosmic Crucified." Crucifixion was a horrendously violent and revolting way to execute the victim—a death reserved for traitors and criminals. Seeing Jesus on a cross profoundly challenged the hope among his followers that he would prove to be the Messiah, leaving them deeply disoriented and depressed. The events that followed were totally unexpected and overwhelming, leading them to the awesome cry, "He lives!" For Thomsen historical investigation of itself cannot establish what was understood to be a resurrection. What we do know is that his disciples were overcome with a tangible sense of his presence, imbuing them with the conviction that out of death had come new life. This experience drove home their conviction that God was truly at work in the remarkable ministry of Jesus; he was indeed the Christ. The crucifixion now assumed an altogether new meaning that has challenged the believing community in every time and

19. "Christology," 136–137.

20. Ibid., 136.

place to articulate, proclaim, and above all to live out in their own lives.

In Thomsen's description of Jesus as the Cosmic Crucified, we see a rich theology of the cross that emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the Christian message. In the crucifixion, faith sees a vulnerable, suffering God whose sacrificial love embraces the sinner. At the same time, a distinctive feature in Thomsen's understanding of the cross is the way he enlarges its meaning well beyond the human story, bringing its message of transformative, suffering love into every corner of the universe. The crucified Christ is the key to grasping the nature of the whole creation. The cosmos itself can now be seen in light of the suffering love of God that is "concretized" in the cross. "Every galaxy, every child, every creature, every electron, move within the compassion of God who 'weeps' in the midst of suffering and 'sings' in the midst of creation's joys."[21] An empirical mindset would certainly question the meaning of a claim that the suffering love of God permeates the universe, from distant galaxies to our evolving planet. Thomsen's response is that a Trinitarian faith "believes that the cross of the Cosmic Crucified lies within the heart of God and therefore the heart of the universe."[22] This is not an empirical description, but a metaphorical, faith-based affirmation of a redemptive power in all of creation whose full meaning awaits the final consummation. Thomsen sees this universal character of God's "saving Logos" in a number of Pauline letters and early theologians, citing Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine.[23]

Thomsen's view of the cross reveals an acute sense of the pain and suffering that runs throughout human history and, indeed, the whole of creation. The mission of God, centering in the violent death of Jesus, brings a "suffering-with-us presence" that would transform our lives by struggling with us against the powers of darkness. It is the struggle of a passionate love that does not crush our apathy and resistance with irresistible omnipotence, but persuasively draws us out of our brokenness. "Only vulnerable love authentically transforms life. Ultimate truth is crucified truth. Jesus as crucified truth calls us into participation in crucified truth."[24] This vulnerability and weakness is strikingly present not only in the cross itself but in the whole life and ministry of Jesus. Thus, both his life and his message concerning the kingdom of God are revolutionary, turning things upside down, as far as human expectations are concerned.

In addressing the crucifixion as atonement, Thomsen finds support in the works of Kazo Kitamori and Jurgen Moltmann.[25] Both of these theologians identify the cross with the suffering of God, a view that receives particular emphasis in Thomsen's Christology. He is critical of those atonement theories going back to Anselm that have pitted a God jealous of his honor, or a wrathful, justice-demanding God against the God of love personified in Jesus.[26] On the contrary, atonement centers in the suffering love of God, which bears our brokenness and has the power to reconcile and transform a wayward world. Because "Jesus' cross is also God's cross,"

21. *Jesus,* 129.

22. Ibid., 54.

23. See *Christ Crucified: A 21st-Century Missiology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004), 36–37, and 116, notes 39 and 40.

24. *Jesus,* 129.

25. Kazo Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965); Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

26. *Christ Crucified,* 21–23.

the crucifixion reveals that the God of our faith is a vulnerable, suffering God, a loving God who can truly transform us from within. This does not mean, however, that there is no place for the wrath of God. In terms of its divine purpose, Thomsen sees God's wrath as a servant of his love, holding us responsible and making clear the destructive nature of our sinfulness. Thus, there is conflict and struggle for the hearts of human beings, a reality that leads Thomsen to look favorably on Gustaf Aulen's *Christus Victor* motif as well as the works of liberation theologians that bring a compelling witness to the transforming, liberating power of the gospel.[27]

Jesus Christ and interfaith relations

Living now in the shrunken, global village of the twenty-first century, Thomsen forcefully lifts up the church's imperative to proclaim the universal and unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus. The church's history has too often betrayed a desire to restrict and control the good news, defining and confining salvation within the comfortable limits of the church. This is a betrayal not only of the church's mission, but also of the gospel itself. Thomsen roots the universal character of the church's gospel in a Lutheran theology of the cross, acknowledging that the sixteenth-century tradition must be "stretched" in order to enable its effective dialogue with the ecumenical and interfaith currents of our time. I believe this "stretching" can be seen in the broader vision that Thomsen brings to the cross of Christ, giving it a cosmic, universal dimension that speaks to the "global village" in which we live. This is not doing violence to the tradition; its validity is affirmed in its capacity to be interpreted anew in the changing circumstances of history. Thomsen is convinced that this reframing of an earlier theology of the cross not only brings new life to it, but also enables it to be "more faithful to the full biblical tradition."[28]

The implications of our recognizing the universal, all-embracing nature of the love of God concretized in Christ are profound, not least in the way the church relates to those of other faiths. It requires a self-critical consciousness that does not allow the church to identify itself with any given nation or culture, a situation that inevitably prejudices the church's image in the world. Nor can the church be authentic as the body of Christ if it claims as its own possession an Ultimate Truth, which actually transcends the church. That posture is the besetting sin of an imperial Christendom whose theology claims sovereignty over the gospel itself. It turns the church away from its mission as a servant community, the consequences of which are all the more severe in a pluralistic world where we are rubbing shoulders with people of many different faith traditions. In the twenty-first century, the imperative is all the more urgent that the church embody the ministry of Jesus, living out its mission as a serving and reconciling community.

The good news conveyed by the Cosmic Crucified is all too often reduced to the expectation of a heavenly reward if one believes in Jesus. For Thomsen, that view limits and even disavows the breadth and depth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the freedom of the Spirit of God at work in the world. To be sure, the good news of cross and resurrection does address our mortality, bestowing hope that reaches beyond the grave. But for Thomsen, the message of the cross turns our attention to the realities of this world, where God

27. *Jesus,* 26–29.

28. *Christ Crucified,* 11–12. See *Jesus*, 45–47.

is in solidarity with us in the pain and suffering that mark the human story. We are not alone in the ongoing struggle with the forces of evil that often appear to be overwhelming. As a former missionary, he is convinced that a universal understanding of the saving, reconciling love of God gives renewed vigor to the evangelistic mission of the church. The urgency in proclaiming the gospel message lies in the profoundly good news it bears, that of a gracious God whose love embraces the world rather than the means of saving the fortunate believer from eternal judgment.[29] This positive message is the "most authentic way to articulate the gospel" among people of other faiths. It also brings the imperative that an authentic witness to the gospel on the part of the faith community will demonstrate the life of discipleship, following Christ by participating in the quest for justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Conclusion

A statement of the British historian, Herbert Butterfield, was particularly meaningful to Thomsen and he often cited it: "Hold to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted."[30] This conviction both centers on the core of the gospel and gives an appropriate freedom and flexibility to the mission of the church. Thomsen laments the fact that Lutherans have not always claimed that freedom. The concern to keep and maintain an orthodox theology has too often threatened to imprison them in the past. As a Lutheran theologian and pastor, Thomsen loved his church enough to challenge it where he recognized the need of doing so. That made his contribution to the life and mission of his church all the more significant.

I close by quoting two sentences he wrote (note the added emphasis he gives them with italics) that express this spirit of critical devotion to the church and its mission: "It is essential to recognize that *only a church with the capacity for cultural change and adaptability has the potential for being a faithful instrument of the* Missio Dei. *It is only when a theological tradition forms a foundation rather than a fortress that it can speak to a post-Christian and pluralistic century.*"[31] The life and work of Mark Thomsen has been a persuasive witness to the truth of this statement.

29. *Jesus,* 10.

30. Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 146 as cited in *Christ Crucified,* 16.

31. *Christ Crucified,* 17. Thomsen's emphasis.

A Theologian of the Cross

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In the fall of 1983, I was a young pastor serving in Cairo, Egypt. A year before, I had completed a two-and-a-half year term as the part-time pastor of the Heliopolis Community Church, an international, interdenominational church located in the Heliopolis section of Cairo, there to provide a church home for English-speaking expatriates. I was now in my second year of full-time Arabic language study, and beginning to contemplate how I could arrange to do doctoral work in Islamic studies afterward.

Since 1982, Mark Thomsen had been the Executive Director of the American Lutheran Church's (ALC)[1] Division for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation (DWMIC), which had sent me and my wife, Joanne, to Cairo in 1979. A former missionary in northern Nigeria, Thomsen "was firmly committed to a Lutheran agenda of coming to terms with Islam, socially, theologically, and missiologically."[2] From the beginning of his work with the ALC's DWMIC, he was thinking about developing a cadre of missionaries who would engage in the advanced study of various world religions, including Islam, which would equip them for constructive interfaith engagement in their countries of service and to serve as resources for the church in the United States. My interest in doctoral studies coalesced with Thomsen's interest in training what he grandly called a new order of "Lutheran Jesuits."[3] With the support of the ALC's DWMIC, I spent three and a half years in England doing doctoral work at the University of Birmingham through the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations of the Selly Oak Colleges. I returned to Cairo in the spring of 1988, and in my remaining fifteen years there continued to receive Thomsen's support and encouragement for the various tasks I undertook,[4] even after he retired in 1996. This support and encouragement continued after I returned to the United States in 2003, since which time I have been at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. I am deeply indebted to Mark Thomsen.

Thomsen's vision of God

No one could rightly accuse Mark Thomsen of having a small understanding of God. He wrote and spoke of "the Cosmic Abba," "the Cosmic Mother," "the Universal Abba," "the Abba of the Universe,"

1. One of the three bodies that joined together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which came into being on January 1, 1988.

2. David D. Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), 226.

3. Ibid., 228.

4. During this period, I served as pastor of St. Andrew's United Church of Cairo for ten years (1988–1998) and for five years as the coordinator of graduate studies at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (1998–2003).

"the Cosmic Other,"[5] "the Heart of the universe,"[6] "the Cosmic Weaver,"[7] "the Cosmic Vulnerable Companion,"[8] "the Heart of the galaxies,"[9] and the "God of galaxies."[10] However, his majestic vision of God was firmly rooted in a very particular event: the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a cross in first-century Jerusalem, whom Thomsen called "the Cosmic Crucified"[11] and "the crucified Truth."[12]

As Martin Luther "used the expression 'theologian of the cross,' instead of 'theology of the cross,' indicating his preference for theology done from the point of view or perspective of the cross, as a disposition, rather than theology *about* the cross,"[13] so Mark Thomsen was a theologian of the cross. In particular, he reflected extensively on the significance of the cross for Christian mission. One of his early efforts of putting his thoughts into writing was an essay he composed for a task force comprised of eight scholars he convened under the auspices of the ALC's DWMIC who reflected on the topic "God and Jesus: Theological Reflections for Christian-Muslim Dialog."[14] He subsequently elaborated further on this theme in two books: *Christ Crucified: A 21st-Century Missiology of the Cross*,[15] and *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross: An Engagement with Muslims, Buddhists, and Other Peoples of Faith*.[16] In these publications, his chief concern was to draw out the implications of the cross for Christian mission, which he did with a rigor and boldness second to none. As David D. Grafton has noted, "Throughout his tenure with the ALC and the ELCA, Thomsen worked to develop a missiology for the church based upon a theology of the cross, where to be a disciple of the God who reveals himself in the crucified Christ is to enter into a 'cruciform' mission."[17] The remainder of this brief essay focuses upon Thomsen's contribution to this theme.

5. See, for instance, Mark Thomsen, *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2008), 12–15.

6. See, for instance, Mark Thomsen, *Christ Crucified: A 21st-Century Missiology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004), 33, 36, 38.

7. See, for instance, Ibid., 43.

8. See, for instance, Ibid., 84.

9. See, for instance, Ibid., 85.

10. See, for instance, Ibid., 104.

11. See, for instance, *Jesus*, 38–55, *passim*.

12. See, for instance, *Christ Crucified*, 32.

13. Vítor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 113.

14. Mark Thomsen, "The Mission and Witness of the Church Within a Muslim Community," in *God and Jesus: Theological Reflections for Christian-Muslim Dialog* (Minneapolis: The Division for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation of the American Lutheran Church, 1986), 80–94.

15. For publication details, see note 6.

16. For publication details, see note 5.

17. Grafton, *Piety*, 228. From Thomsen's own hand on this, see, for instance, *Jesus*, 22–25. It should be noted that for Thomsen the resurrection faith lies behind the theology of the cross found in his writings, but his focus was on the significance of the cross for Christian faith and mission (see *Christ Crucified*, 120, fn 139), which he believed has too often been neglected to the detriment of Christian mission. In his theology, the cross and resurrection are a tandem. For instance, he wrote: "The resurrection faith proclaims that Jesus Crucified is the one who is raised from the dead, sits at the right hand of God, and the one to whom the future belongs. The resurrection announces that, contrary to human expectations, Christ's way of the cross is God's way in the world" (*Christ,* 76).

Cruciform mission

I believe Mark Thomsen would have agreed with the words of the nineteenth-century Cuban writer and nationalist hero José Martí, who used to say, "Sometimes the best way to say something is to do it."[18] Thus, for Thomsen it was important for Christians not only to reflect upon and speak about the significance of the cross, but also to live and witness to the gospel in ways shaped by the cross. Christians are called to participate in the *missio dei*, and as the cross of Jesus is "the primary symbol of the mission of God,"[19] their participation must be formed by what they believe God was doing through Jesus crucified.

> …of primary significance is the fact that the messengers proclaiming the gospel be understood as participants in the mission of God incarnate in Jesus crucified. Not only our message must be formed and informed by the cross, but our style and form of presence in the world must be formed by the cross.[20]

This mission takes the totality of human life seriously, because the concretization of God's mission in Jesus' life and ministry, and epitomized by the vulnerability of God's love in Jesus crucified, reveals that God intends all of life to be transformed.[21] A spirit of self-giving love defines cruciform mission, which is persistent and willingly vulnerable even unto death. It "affirms that life and the transformation of life, not suffering and death, are the ultimate purposes of God," and it celebrates "the value of life, life that is worth living and even dying for."[22]

This is a corrective to the way Christian mission has been conducted at times in the past, and even yet today, particularly by western missionaries. It is rooted in an understanding of God that is often counter-cultural, not least for American Christians.

> The God manifest in Jesus crucified has nothing in common with numerous portraits of God created within our culture. The God of Jesus cannot be identified with the God who blesses the United States or any nation's security or military power. The God of Jesus has nothing in common with any God who promises financial reward, physical comfort, or a life without struggle for God's people. The God of Jesus challenges, critiques, and judges all forms of power and imperialism—cultural, economic, racial, or political. In contrast to the demons and divinities of invincibility worshiped and celebrated by American culture, the God of Jesus is essentially marked by vulnerability, by an infinite capacity to share and bear the cumulative weight of human pain and suffering. This is God concretized in Jesus crucified and risen, the Cosmic Crucified. This is the God who takes the form of outstretched, open, spike-pierced hands, the God who is embodied in a half-naked human figure washing fishermen's feet, the God who like a mother hen scurries about clucking, gathering chicks under her wings in order to absorb the threat of death in her own body, the God who like a mother in childbirth gasps and cries to bring forth a new creation.[23]

Indeed, Thomsen argued, the most authentic voices of Christian mission may

18. Quoted in Westhelle, *The Scandalous God*, 119.

19. *Christ Crucified*, 10. In the same book, he similarly calls the cross "the primary key for interpreting the whole of Christian thought and praxis" (22).

20. *Jesus*, 23–24.

21. Ibid., 26, 37–38.

22. *Christ Crucified*, 21.

23. *Jesus*, 41.

be found elsewhere—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, or within marginalized communities in Europe and the United States.[24]

Thomsen held unabashedly that God's "love concretized in crucified love" provides the norm for understanding how God works not simply on planet earth but throughout the universe. This love "permeates and embraces creation…. God is not and never will be other than cosmic love identified in crucified love."[25] God's unconditional, persevering, and costly love—manifest throughout history but revealed most clearly in the crucified Jesus—must be the motivating and shaping force at the center of Christian mission. The followers of Jesus are "called to costly mission discipleship to be a serving, sacrificing, suffering church in order that the gospel of the Cosmic Crucified might as light, leaven and salt permeate every dimension of human life and history."[26]

Discipleship in mission, which conforms to Jesus crucified, unfolds in three ways. First, as God incarnate in Jesus reveals God's solidarity with human brokenness and pain, so Christian participation in the mission of God means "passionate involvement in human suffering."[27] It cannot be done from a distance. It calls us to be a suffering-with-us people who follow the lead of the suffering-with-us God. Second, it means participating "in the messianic struggle for life in the midst of death."[28] This involves being a continuing prophetic voice that is salt and light in the world, crosses exclusionary boundaries with a view to insuring that all may participate fully in the new creation inaugurated by Christ, and is passionately concerned for the whole creation. Third, discipleship in cruciform mission is a "call to vulnerability."[29] It strives to conform to the vulnerable, self-giving love manifest in Jesus crucified. It does not collaborate with military and socio-economic forces to accomplish its purposes and protect its achievements.

Dialogue and witness

How did Mark Thomsen understand cruciform mission in relation to people of other religious communities? He asserted that there are "normative affirmations" Christians are to make about Jesus, which "center in the fact that it is the self-giving, unconditionally loving, vulnerable crucified Jesus who concretizes the Kingdom of God," while also affirming "that it is precisely the crucified servant of God and Prince of Peace who transcends cultural and historical relativity."[30] Yet, he cautioned, this is not to assert "that the present transformation and the eternal destiny of every person depends upon meeting this Jesus through the preaching of the gospel within history or being recognized members of our Christian institutions."[31]

In interfaith dialogue and witness,

24. *Christ Crucified*, 92.

25. *Jesus*, 64. He states it similarly in at least two places in *Crucified Christ*: 1) "An authentic theology of the cross trusts that God's 'crucified Truth'—incarnate and concretized in Jesus—flows from the heart of the universe and is universally present. God can be trusted to be none other than the life-affirming, all-embracing, all-forgiving, vulnerable love heard, seen and touched in the crucified one (I John 1:1-2)" (10); 2) "From the perspective of this writer, there is no God other than the God embodied and identified in the Crucified" (52).

26. *Jesus*, 68.

27. Ibid., 73–75.

28. Ibid., 75–81.

29. Ibid., 81–83.

30. Ibid., 91. See also, *Christ Crucified*, 76, 82–86.

31. *Christ Crucified*, 85.

Christians will speak about God's entry into human life in Jesus Christ through whom God manifested unconditional and transforming love. Thomsen highlighted several implications this has for interfaith engagement. First, every person has infinite worth, and one way to value that is to listen to people of other religious communities and care about them, even if they do not embrace the gospel message. Second, Christians in dialogue and witness will conform to the Cosmic Crucified, empowered by the Spirit to be conformed to the self-giving, vulnerable love of God. Third, Christians will assume that the suffering-with-us God is already present and in solidarity with the people of other religious communities, so they too will strive to be present and in solidarity with them in their hopes, joys, struggles, and pain. Fourth, dialogue and witness, which conforms to Jesus crucified, will be rooted in God's struggle with those powers that would distort and destroy God's creation, will participate in the divine struggle for justice and peace, and will be ready to collaborate with people of other religious communities in this struggle. Finally, theological dialogue, including the discussion of similarities and differences in religious convictions and practices, should not take place in abstract isolation but within broader conversations about the meaning, joys, challenges, and shared struggles of life. For Christians, such interfaith engagement is an occasion for both dialogue *and* witness. They will seek clarity from and deeper understanding of their interfaith partners, being ready to listen, learn, and affirm in a spirit of respect, but will also be ready to discuss their own deeply held religious convictions.[32]

While Thomsen believed that God is at work throughout the creation, including within other faith traditions and communities, and that there is much to be appreciated and affirmed within them, he was not an advocate for religious relativism. He asserted:

> it is a total acceptance of Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship by the Jesus movement that will enable the Christian community to make a creative contribution to the transformation of humanity and will also enable Christians to enter into genuine dialogue and community with peoples of other faiths. Only when the power of creative, life-transforming, persistent, persevering and vulnerable love, embodied in the crucified Jesus, becomes normative for the Christian community's proclamation and praxis will the church begin to be a transforming agent within the human community and a dialogical partner with the full human family. Only then will the Jesus movement authentically proclaim the life-transforming power of Christ as the crucified Truth.[33]

The church's mission must not be limited to specialists or clergy. Thomsen passionately claimed that it must involve the whole church; it is part of the calling or vocation in daily life of every Christian. It was his conviction that, "If the future belongs to the priesthood of all believers, the clergy and the gathered community will have their opportunity to find their own unique role in the mission of God."[34] This includes Christian mission as engagement with peoples of other faiths.

Christian-Muslim dialogue

In his writing about cruciform mission, Thomsen gave particular attention to interfaith engagement with Muslims and

32. *Jesus*, 91–98. See also, *Christ Crucified*, 76–82.

33. *Christ Crucified*, 76.

34. Ibid., 15.

Buddhists.[35] With respect to Muslims, he was, of course, arguing on the basis of an understanding of God at work in Jesus that Muslims find objectionable. They highly revere Jesus as one of God's prophets, but do not accept that he died on a cross, let alone how Christians interpret that death.[36] For Muslims, there is real human failure for which humans, not God, are ultimately responsible. Furthermore, to say that God caused Jesus' death for some divine purpose is tantamount to attributing an injustice to God. Consider, for instance, these words from the late Mohamed al-Nowaihi.[37]

> Man is born of a neutral nature with a completely clean slate, and is capable of both good and evil. He is given both rational power and divine guidance through the prophets to induce him to choose the good and forsake the bad, but it is his duty to make the choice. He alone is responsible and answerable for his error if he errs. Every individual carries only his own burden of deeds and misdeeds and has himself to expiate his sins. Briefly, then, the cross, which for Christians is charged with so many noble ideas of self-sacrifice and God's love and concern for man, only calls the loathsome notions of injustice and treachery to the mind of a Muslim traditionalist.[38]

Seyyid Hossein Nasr[39] claims that, while other Christian doctrines that have been an issue between Christians and Muslims, such as the Trinity or the divine nature of Christ, may be understood metaphysically in such a way as to harmonize the Muslim and Christian perspectives, the crucifixion of Jesus is "the one irreducible 'fact' separating Christianity and Islam, a fact which is in reality placed there providentially to prevent a mingling of the two religions."[40] Finally, the late Fazlur Rahman[41] saw Christianity's emphasis upon sacrificial love as a significant weakness: "But such religious ideologies as have put their whole emphasis on God's love and self-sacrifice for the sake of His children have done little service to the moral maturity of man."[42] In his view, the Christian emphasis upon costly love leads to human irresponsibility. When is humanity, he asks, supposed

35. See especially, *Jesus*, 99–128. For a number of years, he was one of the professors in a course offered at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago titled, "Religions in Dialogue: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity," and team-taught by a Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian.

36. Occasionally (it is impossible to quantify), one may find a Muslim who will accept that Jesus died on a cross. I recall, for instance, a class session on Islamic Christology I attended during my doctoral studies in England. Our Muslim professor, Hasan Askari, said to the class, "I can accept that Jesus died on a cross." Then, after a brief pause, he added, "But I can't accept the Christian interpretations of that death."

37. Prior to his death in 1981, he was Professor of Arabic Language and Literature of the American University in Cairo.

38. Mohamed al-Nowaihi, "The Religion of Islam: A Presentation to Christians," *International Review of Mission* 65 (April 1976): 217.

39. Born in Iran, he is University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University.

40. Seyyid Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 209–210.

41. Born in what is today Pakistan, he was at the time of his death in 1988 the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Chicago.

42. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), 9.

to come of age, stop being treated like children, and be held responsible?

Mark Thomsen was acutely aware that Christian convictions about the crucifixion of Jesus are problematic for Muslims.[43] It seems he was not preoccupied with trying to provide Muslims with apologetic explanations demonstrating that Jesus actually died on a cross. However, he did see Christian-Muslim dialogue as an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to discuss their respective understandings of God's costly grace and merciful justice.[44] Such dialogue is also a place for conversation about the Christian conviction that Jesus crucified is the incarnation of the suffering-with-us God.[45]

Alister McGrath, who also has reflected extensively upon the cross, has written:

> To be a theologian of the cross is to recognize that we are simply not authorized to base responsible Christian discussion of God or ourselves upon anything other than the crucified and risen Christ, and to exalt in and wonder at the astonishing and liberating understanding of God which results. Just as two lovers may return to the place at which their love was born, in order to recapture both the memories which that place holds and the original vitality and freshness of that love, so the Christian church must learn to return to the place at which its faith was born, in order to remember the despair of the cross and the joy of the resurrection and recapture once more the sense of wonder and excitement which underlies the Christian faith. And if we have lost that sense of wonder, perhaps it is time to return to that cross, there to learn the story of God's dealings with us all over again.[46]

Mark Thomsen persistently returned to the cross, and endeavored to make it the foundation for his understanding of and discourse about God and Christian participation in the mission of God. He argued his case cogently and persuasively. He occupied positions as a college and seminary professor, and executive director of the ALC's and the ELCA's global mission units, that allowed him to impact the thinking of many other people both within the United States and globally. It was a task in which he took much delight and pursued with deep conviction and passion. In this writer's view, he made a significant contribution as a theologian of the cross to the way Christians think about and engage in mission.

43. See, for instance, *Jesus*, 7, 100, 107–109.

44. *Jesus*, 100–102, 107–109.

45. Ibid., 102–107.

46. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 190.

A Visionary for Christian Mission in the Middle East

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I was sad when we heard of Mark's illness and subsequent death, but also full of joy and gratitude for the life he lived and the gifts he shared. He had an abundant and infectious faith in the goodness of God, in the wideness of God's mercy and love. I first met Mark in 1981 and was eager to share the vision that I, and others from the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), had framed as the foundation of our work in the Middle East. We saw our mission as threefold: to work ecumenically, to encourage the work of existing Christian institutions so as not to establish new ones, and to build trust with local people. Through collaboration, confidence-building, and patience, we would be able to erect bridges across which the good news of the gospel could be shared.

Early LCA work in the Middle East

Working ecumenically was not part of my upbringing in Iowa, where the only diversity was between Reformed and Christian Reformed churches. Fortunately, when I left home and went off to college and then seminary at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Jersey, my horizons broadened and love for ecumenism developed. Before going overseas in 1963, we spent five months in training at Stony Point, N.Y., a thoroughly ecumenical venture. Once overseas in the Arabian Gulf, Catholics, Orthodox, many kinds of Protestants, Sunni and Shi'i Muslims entered my radar screen. I had no choice but to breathe the ecumenical and interfaith air all around us. This suited me perfectly for my new "Lutheran" assignment, which began in 1972.[1]

We had been told by David Vikner, Fred Neudoerffer,[2] and others that we were not to establish any new Lutheran program or institution in the Middle East. "The days for doing that are over," they said. They wanted us, first and foremost, to observe who was there, to meet the people and learn what they were doing, to study the how and why of "their" ministries, and if they had any needs they were willing to share with us. Most importantly, we were to look for signs of God at work in and through their lives and activities as they related to Muslims. Then and only then, were we to determine if there was a place or way for us to be of service, or rather to be with them in serving their communities.

Therefore, we set out visiting as many Christian and Muslim communities as we

1. For further information on Vogelaar's life and ministry, see Jan Boden, "Following Jesus: Harold Vogelaar's Faithful Journey," *LTSC Epistle* 36:1 (Winter 2006), 9–11.

2. David Vikner served as the LCA's Director of the Division for World Mission and Ecumenism from 1974–1982. Fred Neudoerffer served as the Middle East and South Asia Area Program director of the LCA from 1969–1984.

could, drinking lots of tea, and listening to many stories. Whenever possible we brought people together and encouraged them to share and listen to each other. Eventually our team, living in the occupied West Bank and in Egypt, found our way into positions of teaching in local schools and universities, engaging in archeological work, serving as nurse practitioners, pastors of expatriate churches, administrators of ministries, and refugee work. I personally taught for fifteen years in the Evangelical Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Synod of the Nile.

When Neudoerffer cautioned his colleagues at the LCA offices that this venture into sustained Christian-Muslim engagement in the Middle East would require patience, persistence, endurance, and even travail, he knew well their need for measurable markers to keep the venture alive and funded by American congregations.[3] This call to be persistent and patient while engaging Muslims was not seen by all in the LCA as a worthy venture at the time. Many were willing to support ongoing work in India, Indonesia, and parts of Africa but were skeptical about the Middle East. Historically Germans and Scandinavians had church connections there, and a few Missouri Synod personnel were in Lebanon, but none from the LCA.[4] This general reluctance was encouraged, if not brought on, by Christian Zionists, who loudly proclaimed their support for the state of Israel as a precursor for the second coming of Christ. It was easy for many western Christians, including some Lutherans, to fall into that mindset. The stunning victory of Israel over the Arab states in 1967 seemed to have set the stage not just for greater sympathy for Jews but antipathy towards Arab Muslims. Many thought it was not the time for patient love towards such people.

Undaunted, Neudoerffer arranged for teams of twelve to fifteen, mostly Lutherans, living in majority Muslim countries to come to Cairo for month-long seminars. For several years in the 1970s we hosted church leaders from Africa and Asia, as far away as the Philippines and Indonesia. With the help of Coptic scholars the seminars focused on Egypt and the Bible for two weeks, and then on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations for two weeks. For several of these events, Dr. Wilhem Bijlefeld from the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary joined us. These were wonderful occasions where church leaders from different countries met, lived, studied, and worshiped together. They each shared stories from their own contexts. Good seeds were sown during these seminars, seeds that eventually bore fruit for the kingdom.

The beginning of ELCA mission in the Middle East

It was against this background that my first meeting with Mark Thomsen took place in 1981. I remember feeling a little anxious. After all, the LCA and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) were moving toward merger, and eventually he might be the person in charge of Global Mission. I had no idea how much he knew of our LCA venture, warmed to it, or whether he would fully support it. While specifics of our meeting are vague,

3. One of the most difficult "travails" was the murder of Dr. Al Glock by an unknown assailant near his home on the West Bank in 1992.

4. The LCMS began a radio ministry in Beirut in 1950. They developed a sustained presence with the arrival of the Rev. Dennis and Ellen Hilgendorf in 1962 and the Rev. John and Kathryn Stelling in 1963.

the images that linger convey warmth and camaraderie. What I remember clearly was his reference to Nikos Kazantzakis novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ,* and the image of Jesus being hung out to die in "the dust and the wind." For him this was not a sign of whether God loves us, but rather how far God's amazing love will go to save a lost and broken world. Mark was passionate that the church not wrap itself in the robes of piety, power, and self-preservation all to avoid the costly path of love to which Christ calls us. It was this passionate love for Christ, and the way of the cross as a path to be walked, that stood out so clearly that day. Looking back, the fear and trepidation I initially felt was soon found to be unwarranted.

I then learned that Mark had become involved in Christian-Muslim relationships while serving with the ALC at The Theological College of Northern Nigeria from 1957-1966. He was fortunate to be present in Africa when the first creative initiatives were being made to transform Christian-Muslim struggles into genuine engagements of friendship and cooperation. Nigeria became the early center of that initiative in 1960 when the *Islam in Africa* project was located there. Dr. Wilhem Bijlefeld was called as the first Director of this center. Soon after Mark was called as the Executive Director of the division for World Mission of the ALC in 1981. He made Christian-Muslim relations a priority of the division's work. Because of their African connections, he invited Dr. Bijlefeld to lead a theological discussion dealing with Christian-Muslim dialogue.[5]

5. The result of this initiative was *God and Jesus: Theological reflections for Christian-Muslim Dialog* (Minneapolis: Division for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation, American Lutheran Church, 1986).

Clearly, I had found in Mark a kindred spirit. Under Mark's leadership, the vision for mission in the Middle East that had

His presence, maturity, and creativity in interpreting the Christian tradition definitely helped to illumine the landscape, to deepen our level of discourse, and give rise to bonds of friendship and trust that continue to inspire.

been carefully nurtured within the LCA was affirmed, strengthened, and made more inclusive. Mark provided a fresh burst of energy to Lutheran engagement with Muslims and, in addition to administrative skills, brought several special gifts.

First, Mark brought with him the disciplines of theology and missiology, two areas of expertise sorely needed to engage the Muslim community. Anyone involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue knows how often questions of theological import rise to the surface. With Mark's help, we became much more adept and sensitive to the gravity of such struggles. His presence, maturity, and creativity in interpreting the Christian tradition definitely helped

to illumine the landscape, to deepen our level of discourse, and give rise to bonds of friendship and trust that continue to inspire.

Second, while Mark had deep appreciation for the history, depth, and richness of church tradition, he never seemed fettered by it. Keen to preserve the best of our heritage, he resisted letting the past completely dominate and control us. He came to believe that the best and most effective way to master the dynamics of continuity while sailing on stormy seas of change, was not to make sure everything was done just according to "tradition," but to search for and to do the right thing for our time. He had a wonderful way of taking the core of our Christian beliefs and values and pouring them into new wineskins that are more pliable.

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We saw this in the way he read and interpreted scripture. He learned to not only love and care for family and friends, the disabled and differently abled, but to embrace and affirm what some were, at that time, calling risky and aberrant currents of thought. He publicly affirmed the inclusion of women into all stations of ministry, the protection for women to control their own reproductive rights, and the inclusion of all regardless of race or sexual orientation. In all these issues, he showed himself a gifted theologian completely committed to God's mission in the world. He was a strong defender of the weak, and an ardent proponent for freedom, justice, and human dignity for all. Mark demonstrated his commitment to the least among us, especially by championing the rights of the Palestinians. He demonstrated courage by speaking his mind on this issue.[6] Following his retirement at the ELCA, we were team teaching a course at LSTC on "Palestine-Israel: Towards Understanding the Conflict." In preparing for our third year of teaching this course, we were approached by several Jewish community leaders, who in the presence of LSTC's president said that we should be careful about the resource people we used, as some were not acceptable to the Jewish community. We assured them that in presenting the Israeli side we would be open to any suggestions they had, but as for the Palestinians we would make our own choices as to whom we deemed appropriate. To his credit, our president sided with us, saying that academic freedom was foundational to seminary instruction.

A courageous proponent of dialogue

If Mark never shied from allowing current events to challenge, sharpen, and even

6. See "A Word of Truth on Behalf of the Palestinian Marginalized and Dispossessed: Root Causes of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," (*ChristianZionism.org,* 2006), http://www.christianzionism.org/Article/Thomsen01.pdf [accessed 1 September 2014].

reshape his theological thinking, it was in missiology and interfaith relations that he was tireless in seeking new and creative ways to discern and welcome the gifts that people of all faiths bring to the table. In the '60s and '70s, there was lively debate about the wisdom of the term "dialogue" when speaking about mission. *Conversion* not *Conversation* was the preferred term. *Discontinuity* not *Continuity* was considered by many the correct way to respond to new converts. There was a fear that any continuity with bygone practices, such as the way one dressed, the food one ate, the names one used, etc., could weaken one's newfound faith. Gradually, however, the understanding of dialogue deepened to mean not just the opposite of monologue, but rather dialogue, where two or more people engage in significant conversation as they think through [*dia*] issues, and in this process share a Word [*logos*] precious to them. When the focus shifted as to how the concrete principles and commitments of that word actually shaped one's life and thinking, the emphasis on conversion lessened. Not that conversions stopped. They did not and must not. However, the pressure was lifted to produce converts as a sign of success.

Mark was a strong proponent of such forms of dialogue. He wanted others to understand that this kind of engagement with Muslims, Buddhists, and others should not be seen as something ancillary to the Christian faith, an interesting tactic, or venture when funds are plentiful but expendable when funds run low. To be in heartfelt conversation with others about faith issues, allowing one's own faith to challenge and test that of others, and to be challenged and tested by others, was a deeply fulfilling form of Christian witness. It was, he believed, a style of Christian living rooted in the biblical story itself.[7]

I saw Mark's dedication to dialogue illustrated by the fact that the annual Global Mission and missionary training events usually included sessions on Christian-Muslim relations. For many of these presentations Muslims were invited as full participants. It was my good fortune to take part in over twenty such events through the years, often with the help of Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi, a trusted friend and colleague. One year Mark invited Dr. Rif'at Hassan, a well-known Pakistani feminist leader and scholar to make several presentations. The interaction was challenging and creative. This desire to do things in concert with Muslims carried over into his courses on Islam and interfaith dialogue at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). At the seminary, Mark joined us in insisting that adherents of each faith, be it Judaism, Buddhism, or Islam, be present as presenters of their own tradition. Looking back, I cannot imagine a better way. While some may question the broad embrace of Mark's love and his theological and scriptural positions to support it, none can question the depth of his sincerity, his passion, and his commitment to follow the path of Christ, to walk in the way of the cross.

The radical path of forgiveness

Mark firmly believed that to walk in the way of Jesus is to walk a non-violent path. He did not believe that Jesus would ever ask his disciples to use violence or raw force. Mark said that to suggest that Jesus was a Zealot, as Reza Aslan does in his book *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, is pure nonsense. He liked to

7. See his, "Expanding the Scope of God's Grace: Christian Perspectives and Values for Interfaith Relations," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40, no 2 (April 2013), 85–94.

say that after Jesus' resurrection, he never once suggested his disciples should now seek vengeance against those who had rejected and crucified him. In a private conversation Mark said, "In this Jesus way of compassion, all humanity, even our enemies, are embraced by the love and forgiveness of God." Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi always reminds me that this universal graciousness of God is a theme that can be found in the Qur'an. He points to Surah 6.12 and 54 and to Surah 7.156, [where the Qur'an says, that "God has written upon Godself to be merciful," a mercy that extends to all things].

Mark often referred to an incident that happened to my first wife, Neva, and me one day in the Nile Delta. Here is the way I described it years ago:

It happened, when we were living in Egypt, that a student of my wife invited us to visit his home in the Nile Delta. We gladly accepted this gracious invitation. Once there, he showed us his amazing potato field. He then welcomed us into his modest home. In one corner of a room, were some rolled up papers and when asked what they were he said, "Some drawings. Just a few sketches I've made." When asked if we could see, he picked up one to unroll. It was the picture of a young man. He was dressed in a *galabiyya, kufiyya* and *aqqal*, like a typical Saudi Arab. In one hand, stretching foreword was a dove. In the other, raised high above, was a long sword. It was barely visible, but there it was. Stereotypical images of duplicity, of swords and violence came to mind. When asked what he intended to convey by the picture he said, "As Muslims we must always offer peace first, but if that's rejected, we need the sword to defend ourselves." I thought to myself. "That sounds almost American."

We then asked Muhammad whether he could paint the picture without a sword, but rather with the dove in both hands. He thought for a moment, and then replied, "I could, but in that case it would have to be a picture of Jesus the Son of Mary. Do you know why?" he queried. "Well if you or I tried it, very soon someone would steal the dove. Then they would take everything we have and finally, [gesturing with his hand to his neck] they would take our lives. We would lose everything here." "However," he continued, "we would gain everything up there." He pointed toward heaven. "On the other hand," he said, "if we held the sword in both hands now, we might gain everything here, but would lose everything up there." Again, he gestured towards heaven. "So, it's better," he assured us, "to hold the dove in one hand and the sword in the other, that way we would have the best of both worlds."

It was an interesting solution to the vexing question of how to balance peace and justice with power. He had high respect for the person and teachings of Jesus, but also real skepticism as to whether those teachings were practical in our kind of world. Yes, Jesus could do it, but not us!

Mark and I often pondered how to form a meaningful response to such a challenge. We knew that many Muslims shared in this admiration. We wondered why Muhammad thought only Jesus could live without the sword. How much of the Jesus story did he really know, and was he aware that Jesus himself faced persecution, was crucified, died, and was buried? What were his thoughts on Jesus' resurrection? Or, did he say what he did because he had never seen or heard of anyone other than Jesus who walked Jesus' path? In other words, the incident opened up a whole range of issues that begged for exploration. Mark and I agreed that to bear a faithful witness to Muslim friends, Christians would have to demonstrate by their lives that Muhammad was both right and wrong.

Yes, only Jesus could walk the way of the cross perfectly; but as his followers, we are called to walk it with him. With divine help, great patience, abounding love, and a life that is truly Christ centered, it can and has been done.

A ministry of reconciliation

Mark and I shared many precious times together in different places, often conversing on themes relating to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish relationships. Mark loved to meet in mosques, large and small, often in little dusty, dingy rooms sitting on rugs on the floor with imams and sheikhs. Mark was a longtime friend and true colleague. I will always be grateful that, when the Reformed Church ended a nearly forty-year relationship, Mark encouraged the ELCA to stand with me, and to continue their support. I know that my marriage to Pisamai, a Muslima from Bangkok, did not make this decision easy. Nevertheless, he insisted. As a result, the ELCA remained steadfast in their commitment. I now believe that God blessed that decision and as a result many good things happened.

One of those many good things was the establishment at LSTC of a Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice, and a Chair in Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Dialogue. Both of these are fully funded through endowments.[8] Through its programs of education and engagement, and because of the dedicated people who serve the Center, a Christian witness remains strong. The Center offers a unique opportunity for the seminary to have an interfaith component as an integral part of its curriculum. It has become an ideal place for people of all faiths to develop bonds of mutual friendship, understanding, trust, cooperation, and appreciation.[9]

The early dream of Neudoerffer, Vikner and others continues to live on. It bears fruit; much needed fruit, one might add, seeing how bleak the landscape appears today. The scene in the Middle East and in much of the Muslim world is as grim today as it was in 1972. If patience was needed then, more patience is needed now. At the time of this writing, war rages in Gaza and is again ravaging the lives of mostly women and children.

The good news is that many Christians with whom we have worked in the Middle East remain where they are, steadfast and firm in their faith and their commitment to the ministry of reconciliation. As one of them said, our task is to turn "enemies" into friends, not friends into enemies. These Christians always have been, and remain, the true emissaries of Christ to Arab Muslims and Israeli Jews. Our challenge and privilege was and is to work among them, with them, and for them. For the One who lifts people up, offering new life, is graciously present in their lives. To be sure, the times are grim, but seen through the eyes of faith and faithfulness, full of hope.

Sad at Mark's passing? Yes. Nevertheless, glad, grateful, and inspired by the remembrance of his life, ministry, vision, and patience. He gave and continues to give in full measure.

8. Supported by donations from Jerry and Karen Kolschowsky.

9. See http://centers.lstc.edu/ccme/.

Cosmic Crucified or One Ultimate Reality? On Becoming a Committed Pluralist

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Twenty-one years ago, Mark Thomsen invited me to be a presenter at the ELCA's annual summer Islamic study program for missionaries. Thus, began a friendship and collaboration that included my service on the Board of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Division for Global Mission (ELCA/DGM), and culminated with my teaching the Religions in Dialogue course, developed in the 1990s at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) by Dr. Yoshiro Ishida, Chao Than, and Harold Vogelaar, and then continued by Vogelaar and Mark Thomsen. During these past two decades my own response to religious pluralism has been influenced by Thomsen's vision for global mission, a vision both shaped by the cross of Christ, and deeply respectful of the diverse cultures and religious traditions he encountered.

Mark Thomsen, global mission, and interreligious formation

From 1957 to 1966 Mark Thomsen served as an American Lutheran Church (ALC) missionary in Nigeria, where he developed a way of interacting with Muslims in Nigeria that influenced his later guidance of the global mission, first in the ALC (1982–1987), and then in the newly formed ELCA (1988–1996). Thomsen ensured that graduate scholarships were available to international leaders and teachers, and that every new ELCA missionary called into Muslim contexts would be prepared to engage Muslims in those new contexts. The missionary preparation took place in graduate study programs, where many earned advanced degrees in Islamic Studies, and through annual summer Islamic study programs at LSTC and Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. In both 1993 and 1994, Thomsen invited me to present a segment on women and family issues in Islam. Not only did those experiences begin my long-term involvement with DGM, they also introduced me to Harold Vogelaar, and his colleague, the Muslim scholar Ghulam-Haider Aasi, who in 2007 became my co-teacher.

In 1997, I began a six-year term as a member of the Board of the ELCA's Division for Global Mission. Mark Thomsen had clearly influenced the direction of the ELCA as the denomination engaged Islamic contexts through many global partnerships. Thomsen's respect for religious others, including Muslims, became apparent as I worked with fellow board members and the Associate Executive Director, the late Will Herzfeld, to craft the Division's language about the theology of interreligious engagement in global mission work. Both Thomsen and Herzfeld helped shape

the ELCA's 1999 planning document, *Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century*. Subsequent executive directors, Bonnie Jensen and Rafael Malpica Padilla, have maintained the approach summed up in the section "Goal 1 - Program Objectives," which reads in part:

> Share the good news of Jesus Christ with those who acknowledge no faith, people of living faiths, adherents of various ideologies, and those who have become inactive in or have abandoned their Christian faith.…Build relationships of respect, listening, understanding and sharing of faith with Muslims.… Build relationships of respect, listening, understanding and witness with Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists and other faith traditions in Asia as well as among modern secularists.[1]

The concept of "witness in dialogue" is not unique to the ELCA, but what is significant and formative for me, is the conviction that such dialogue includes the potential for transformation among all who interact. Illustrative are these points on the dialogical nature of God's mission in *Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century*:

> In a world of religious pluralism, the Christian community is called to witness to the God made known in Jesus Christ.… Christians around the world live in daily contact with people of diverse faiths. The mission of God calls Christians to develop relationships and enter into mutual conversations with these people.… Christians will respect others and allow them to speak for themselves in interpreting the meaning of their religious faith.…Christians will be open to being changed—to expect that their faith might be strengthened even when they do not embrace the other person's faith. Within these relationships, Christians have the privilege of witnessing to Jesus Christ as God's ultimate and life-giving word for the universe.[2]

Engaging Thomsen's Christology and vision for interreligious relations

Being part of the ELCA's global mission efforts to shape such dialogical engagement has been one of the key elements in my own continuing project of being a Lutheran professor of biblical studies and Islam who seeks to learn from people of other religious traditions and of no religious affiliation. Even before I began teaching LSTC's Religions in Dialogue course, Thomsen invited me to critique and review the manuscript that became his 2003 book, *Christ Crucified: A Missiology of the Cross for the Twenty-First Century*. I was honored to contribute this review for the book's promotion: "*Christ Crucified* presents the insightful and incisive perspective of a person who has direct experience with global mission, interfaith relations, and the theology of religious pluralism. Thomsen's cross-based missiology is a welcome theological guide for Christians who wish to be in a relationship of witness, dialogue and service with the neighbor who is also religious other."

My most intensive encounter with Thomsen's Christology and vision for interreligious relations, however, has been teaching his book, *Jesus, The Word, and The Way of the Cross: An Engagement With Muslims, Buddhists, and Other Peoples of Faith*. Between 2007 and 2012, I co-led the LSTC seminar Religions in Dialogue with Dr. Ghulam-Haider Aasi, and Zen Buddhist leader Sevan Ross. Forecasting the seminar's dialogical atmosphere is this email

1. *Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century: A Vision of Evangelical Faithfulness in God's Mission* (Chicago: ELCA, 1999), 25–26.

2. Ibid., 10–11.

I received from Thomsen, as I prepared to teach the course for the first time:

> It has been fun to be a participant in this class. Participants have been honest and there has been real integrity in communications and relationships. There has also been humor and passion and I believe that has been the strength of the class. Perspectives may be different, values may be shared, debates and jokes may be part of the discussion, academics are always part of the mix; however, we are always close friends. Hope you have a great experience.

In the seminar we read and discussed excerpts from two of Thomsen's works: *Christ Crucified* and *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross*.[3] As my Muslim and Buddhist colleagues and our students considered Thomsen's concepts and arguments, I too pondered what was most helpful and what was most challenging. Our occasional Unitarian Universalist students understandably resisted presentation of Christian truth claims as normative and sometimes perceived Thomsen's work to have that tendency, at least in subtle, underlying ways. On the other hand, final papers by several Lutheran students expressed appreciation for Thomsen's theology of the cross and in so doing revealed what they had gained from reading *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross.* One summarized the importance of the crucified Christ as the basis for all Christian theology, and as a message of vulnerability leading Christians to love and serve rather than to dominate. Too often in the centuries after Constantine and especially in the West, organized Christianity has exerted power and force over vulnerability. A second student learned from Thomsen an ethic of servanthood rooted in God as taking flesh in creation and Jesus as suffering servant, an ethic that replaces pride with humility and sacrifice for the good of others.

Although our Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim students have differed on their acceptance of Thomsen's ideas over the years, most have appreciated the distinctions he has helped us to see. For example, his chapter on "Engaging Buddhist Peoples" opens with an excellent analysis of the points of contact between Buddhist notions of *dukkha* (suffering) and Christian understandings of sin as "centering one's life in self."[4] This section also contains a very helpful comparison of the notions of salvation in Christianity, success in Islam, and enlightenment in Buddhism.

In addition to the very valuable insights into the Christian faith Thomsen has given our seminar students, his work has also raised questions about interactions between committed Christians and religious others, specifically Muslims and Buddhists. His chapter on "Engaging Muslim Peoples" prompted us to contemplate whether "merciful justice" and "sacrificial love" characterize the central ways God deals with humankind in Islam and Christianity—and whether justice and grace are the best lenses through which to compare Muslim and Christian views of God. Thomsen's discussion of how Muslims and Christians view the unity and oneness of God includes what for me is his most challenging assertion: "Christians affirm the same unity within the reality of God; however; they see the one God through the window of Jesus the Cosmic Crucified."[5] A close analysis of Thomsen's Christology is not the goal for this brief essay. But my personal grappling

3. *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross: An Engagement with Muslims, Buddhists, and Other Peoples of Faith* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2008).

4. Thomsen, *The Word, and the Way of the Cross,* 113.

5. Ibid., 107.

with the seemingly exclusive nature of this claim is one of the clearest examples of how teaching in Mark's shadow has moved me along the path toward committed pluralism.

On becoming a committed pluralist

Just a few years after accepting Mark Thomsen's invitation to introduce outgoing missionaries to my understandings of women and family issues in Islam, I spent my 1996 sabbatical year, and at least the next decade, researching the many Christian theologies of religious pluralism. I not only read such scholars as Alan Race, Paul Knitter, and S. Mark Heim, I met most of them at meetings of the American Academy of Religion and at the 2002 International Scholars' Jewish-Christian-Muslims Trialogue conference in Skopje, Macedonia. My Religions in Dialogue students and I have welcomed Thomsen's clear summary of these approaches in *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross*.[6] Thomsen's brief outline of his own inclusivist orientation does begin to raise the difficulties of imposing Christian theological categories on the larger question of how to combine one's own faith commitments with an appreciation for others' ways to God and/or ultimate reality. But as one of our Unitarian students put it, "We UU kids are sick of being 'saved' by others in our seminary classes." To that my Buddhist colleague, Sevan Ross, quickly replied, "There is no dialogue unless we see the other's way of life as legitimate." We cannot assume a common vocabulary. Sevan concluded with a short sentence that has also been an important part of my journey toward committed pluralism, "We need to bring our own unknowing to dialogue."

In our seminar the following year, my Muslim colleague Dr. Aasi further highlighted the problem of language: "Muslims and Christians cannot talk without a God category; Buddhists cannot talk without a human category." But of course this distinction goes beyond language to ontology, and to what one knows, or believes, about the nature of ultimate reality. Until I taught Religions in Dialogue, most of my encounters with religious others had invited me to expand my notions of monotheism. Over the years, the words from our brilliant and humble Buddhist colleague have challenged me to think deeply about what is "really real" and how my Christian understanding of a creating and suffering God fits into that reality.

For the privilege of such rich interreligious teaching moments I am indebted to Mark Thomsen, who years ago gave me the opportunities of working with ELCA missionaries, LSTC students, and Buddhist and Muslim co-teachers. With those students and colleagues, I have grappled with the various Christian theological models for engaging interreligious others, models effectively summarized and critiqued in Thomsen's appendix to his 2008 *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross*. Thomsen's analysis of the limitations of such models has contributed to my own preference for developing an "orientation for traveling with religious others" more than a position on religious pluralism.[7]

More challenging has been the process of developing my own alternative to Thomsen's "Cosmic Crucified" for teaching about the Christian way to God and/or for sharing the good news. Team-teaching with a Buddhist and a Muslim, and being in lifelong friendships, especially with faithful Jews and Muslims, have made me aware both of the barriers created by Christian terminology and of the need to

6. Ibid., 145–151.

7. See Lahurd, "Holding Together the Gospel and Interfaith Relations in a Lifelong Journey, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 32:4 (August 2005), 248.

articulate honestly why I personally come to "ultimate reality" through the grace of a God who suffers with and reconciles all of creation.

A few years ago, *The Christian Century* published a print and online conversation titled "The Gospel in Seven Words."[8] Entries included Martin E. Marty's "God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow," Walter Brueggemann's "Israel's God's bodied love continues world-making," and Beverly Roberts Gaventa's "In Christ, God's yes defeats our no." I shared a dozen or so more examples with our LSTC students and invited them to develop their own "gospel in seven words or less." Having reflected on Matt 1:22–23 and Acts 1:6–11, I offered my own abbreviated gospel in terms I hoped could be a bridge at least to other monotheists and an invitation to shared action in the world: "God is with us; get busy!"

And that brings me to my final lesson from Mark Thomsen. His approach can broaden interreligious engagement beyond theological dialogue to shared praxis and friendship. Thus, despite my developing discomfort with some of the theological categories we tend to use in these discussions, Thomsen's practice of mission offers a way to overcome them. Some of his key statements in *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross* suggest a willingness to move beyond the particular Christian lenses for mission: "Centering in God will mean centering in God's human family," and "Many biblical passages indicate that the culminating feast and banquet will be much more inclusive than some Christians might expect."[9] It is my hope that my own ongoing search for new and broader interreligious vocabulary, insights, and practices will build on Mark Thomsen's legacy and lead to new ways for being both committed Christian and existential pluralist.

Reflections from our Buddhist and Muslim colleagues

Sevan Ross has headed the Chicago Zen Center in Evanston, Illinois, and now serves the Zen Buddhist community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For many years, he co-taught LSTC's Religions in Dialogue seminar with Harold Vogelaar, Mark Thomsen, Ghulam-Haider Aasi, and me. Dr. Aasi is currently Adjunct Visiting Professor of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at LSTC and has been team-teaching courses there since 1990. He has taught also at Catholic Theological Union, and has been Associate Professor of Islam and History of Religions at the American Islamic College in Chicago.

Reflections from Ghulam-Haider Aasi

About thirty years ago in the fall of 1984, Dr. Harold S. Vogelaar, a staunch and longtime missionary, while visiting LSTC called on us at the American Islamic College (AIC) in Chicago to start a Christian-Muslim Dialogue at the institutional level. The AIC had then just started its own academic undergraduate program. In fall of 1983 I arrived there as Assistant Professor of Islam and History of Religions. This was the heyday of Christian-Muslim dialogue, in particular in the United States, and the adherents of both traditions were searching for respectful ways to share views of their faith traditions through dialogue and mutual understanding.

Dr. Vogelaar's subsequent visit and proposal to start the Christian-Muslim

8. David Heim, "The Gospel in Seven Words," *The Christian Century* (23 August 2012) (http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-08/gospel-seven-words) (accessed 27 October 2015).

9. Thomsen, 119 and 125, respectively.

dialogue by engaging willing Muslim and Christian religious institutions in the Chicago Metro area led indirectly to formation of the Conference for Improved Christian Muslim Relations, held from 1985 to 1999, and the Council for the Parliament of World's Religions, from 1988 onward. His efforts also fostered a great cooperation between the AIC and LSTC that continues to this day.

In 1988, I was asked to team-teach a course on Religions in Dialogue, first led by Dr. Yoshiro Ishida at LSTC. The course had begun with Buddhism and Christianity, and then Islam was added. When in 1990 Dr. Vogelaar joined the LSTC faculty as Professor of Islam and Christian Muslim relations, I was asked to teach such courses with him.

I cannot recall exactly when and where I first met our kind and generous colleague, the late Rev. Dr. Mark Thomsen. But by early 1990, when he would arrange annual summer Islam study seminars for the ELCA's overseas missionaries, he would lead a Bible study on selected themes and always assigned me to present Qura'nic texts and commentary on the same themes to highlight the strong similarities and distinctive features and emphases of both scriptures. During his leadership in DGM of the ELCA, there would hardly be any workshop session or discussion on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations to which I would not be invited along with Dr. Vogelaar.

I cannot say how much Dr. Thomsen had developed his understanding of the Qur'an and Islam from the teachings and prolific apologetic works of late Anglican Bishop Dr. Kenneth Cragg, but one surely cannot miss Cragg's deep influence on Harold Vogelaar and many other missionaries who have been engaged in Christian-Muslim dialogue.[10]

A very remarkable difference in Thomsen's approach to Islam, however, was that he always respected and took seriously Muslim scholars' understanding of the Qur'an and Islam, rather than arrogating to himself to interpret the Qur'an and Islamic sources. Like all great Christian theologians and missionaries who engage themselves in dialogue with Islam, in the Qura'nic call for pure and pristine *Tawhid*, and in the Qur'an's sharp critique of the church's doctrine of the Trinity, Thomsen also resorted to paradoxical formulas in his apologetic theological response to Islam.[11] As the comprehension of the Trinity for any reflective Muslim is a "stumbling block," to use the Christian term, for Thomsen comprehending the Qura'nic view of a merciful and just God had proven the "stumbling block." However, one thing that distinguished Thomsen from many a Christian missionary was his attitude of utter humility and his frank acknowledgement of how the early church had developed its dogmas in the historical context and in response to the challenges of Greco-Roman ideologies and mythos. He would not shy away or be dismissive of Christianity's failure throughout history to practice its faith ideals of offering the other cheek and loving the enemy. Thomsen was a strong critic of the church's misuse of the cross as the symbol of power and principalities, and of exploitation of the cross as a tool for the Crusades, colonization, the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, slavery, and current urges toward imperialistic designs and the war on terror by the West. He was ever critical of those missionaries who, more often than not, served as agents of Westernization and

10. See for example Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: OneWorld Pub., 2000), *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), and *Muhammad and the Christian* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

11. See, for example Q 4:171.

colonization. He would challenge them to carry their cross and wash the feet of the marginalized and serve the deprived and destitute. For him, mission was a life of witness to faith in the "Cosmic Crucified" and to finding the grace of God in suffering.

In his later years, when taking care of his granddaughter, who never stood or walked due to illness, Thomsen would pray for those who suffer. He would ask how anyone could appropriate the grace or salvation of God for himself or for his faith community at the expense of God's universal grace. If my memory does not fail me, he titled the Global Mission Event one year as "Dare to carry the Cross!" to remind all missionaries that their vocation is to serve those who are suffering.

I have never seen him as distraught and frustrated as when his grandson was called to join the American army in Iraq. Being a faithful and conscientious Christian, Thomsen had all along spoken against the so-called war against terror. Yet, when he found his own grandson as a soldier on the ground, he would always pray for all the victims of war and for the veterans who were thrust into war. He strongly believed in nonviolent, just, and peaceful solutions for all conflicts. His role in encouraging the ELCA to be vocal against the occupation of Palestine and to engage with Christian-Muslim relations based on justice and peace, with due and proper understanding of the issues involved and standing always for the truth, was exemplified by his own life and practice.

I personally found him a graceful and upright Christian. He was offered the award of "Upright Person of *Ahl-al-Kitab*," by the Islamic Foundation North in Libertyville, Illinois. These verses translate: "But they are not all alike; among the followers of earlier revelations there are upright people who recite God's messages throughout the night, and prostrate themselves before God. They believe in God and the Last Day and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong and vie with one another in doing good works, and these are among the righteous" (Q 3:113–14).

Reflections from Sevan Ross

I had the honor of teaching with Mark at LSTC for over ten years. I shared with him one specific arc—the course LSTC calls Religions in Dialogue. A professor from LSTC, a Muslim professor, and a Buddhist teacher all shared the teaching duties. So already, we come to the first rule of "engagement" action: put everyone in the same room, equal time, equal footing. Right up front there is the recognition that these traditions have all spread widely and have provided spiritual guidance over a very long time to millions of people.

Rule number two: do not set the other tradition's representative up simply to provide some straw man argument. I was very concerned when Mark called me out of the blue many years ago and asked me to substitute for the Buddhist teacher who had then been his partner in the course. I still remember hanging up the phone after saying that I could step in and saying to someone who lived at the temple, "Well, this here might be a big mistake."

But after the first three-hour class I felt at home. He let me speak. He gave me enough time to dig down under the terminology, the ritual, the culture, and the assumptions. When I drove home I did not have to pull straw out of my head. And I knew that I was engaging with someone who was so steeped in his own tradition, and so comfortable in his own skin, that he was willing to, and indeed expecting to, go deeper in any encounter with the other tradition. This was new to me, in all my experience in encounters with Christians. It was natural somehow. Not of the head,

but of the heart. So how, I wondered, did this man get to this point?

I think we can say that life can be lived either vertically or horizontally. When one lives life horizontally one has many experiences but often these are shallower experiences. We can even say that horizontal living is the result of looking for "experiences" instead of experiencing what you have found where you are. If life is lived vertically, one may have somewhat fewer experiences, but those experiences may really touch one at a very deep level. We might say even that many shallow experiences do not change us much. But deep ones both change and root us. Rooted trees grow high and strong, provide shade and comfort. Shallow roots give way to floods.

Going deeply into one's tradition—so deeply that one is neither threatened by another tradition, nor feels that one absolutely must hold sway somehow in any encounter with that other tradition—this is not in any way a product of some "vision" of encountering or engaging the "other." This is what I would call "fundamental action." We Zen Buddhists might refer to it as "Doing what first must be done." One must DO this. It is not an idea. Go deep. Then you can talk with someone else in comfort, without a plan. We might make this Mark Thomsen's rule number three.

Now that we are deeply rooted and comfortable in our own ground, we will be better able to feel for ourselves how the "other" might engage their own spiritual practice. But, there is yet another subtle but real barrier to be overcome. It is the natural product of our ever-productive discursive mind. Language.

One night in teaching the Religions in Dialogue course we got on the subject of original sin. Dr. Aasi and Mark held forth in turn about original sin. And then Mark smiled his broad and knowing smile and said, "Ok, Sevan, what do you have for us about original sin?" Of course, in Buddhism *per se* sin doesn't really exist as a concept and original sin is even further out in the Oort cloud,[12] but I pointed out that our problem as humans is that we know what to do but we cannot ever bring ourselves to actually do it. When I finished Mark put his pencil down and he said to the class, "THIS is what I mean by original sin."

What he did in that moment was pull back from any position wrapped around a concept and bound within any of our three traditions. Instead, he created a bridge connecting all three traditions, built of our common understanding of the human condition. And embedded in his declaration was his invitation to others to feel free to find whatever terminology may be needed at any given time to communicate.

Mark well understood that all the terminology, the historical and cultural encrustations, not to mention current social and psychological memes only serve to so engage what we call in Zen "the thinking mind." And in so doing, the thinking mind occupies itself full bore with definitions, vocabulary, concepts, and the like, while the heart goes wanting. Mark brought a Big Heart to the encounter. But this is the last rule in engaging another tradition: go past the language. People are people. And when someone expresses what is in your own heart, no matter the words, hear only with the heart. That is what my friend Mark Thomsen taught me. I prefer to think that Mark never had some "vision" for "encountering" Buddhism. He led with his heart into every discussion. I literally could feel the love. Teaching from deep love, absent a scheme. Sound familiar?

12. The "Oort Cloud" is a body of small icy bodies, which are orbitng the sun at the furthest reaches of the solar system.

A Century of Christian-Muslim Dialogues Across the Globe

Nelly van Doorn-Harder
Professor of Islamic Studies, Wake Forest University

A multi-religious presence: the United States

Since returning from Indonesia in 1999, I have regularly attended the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Since my experience at schools in the United States was limited to one semester as a guest lecturer at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, it seemed that this would be a good place to gain deeper understanding of the "ins and outs" of being a teacher and scholar of Islamic Studies in North America. On average 9,000 professors, students, religious leaders and interested laypersons, authors and publishers flock to the annual event that provides opportunities to learn about anything and everything to do with the study of religion. With so many scholars and presentations, the AAR conference is an exhausting event, where one can spend the day running between conference hotels from panel to panel and meeting to meeting.

It was during one of the AAR meetings held in Chicago that it struck me how change reveals itself in the most unexpected corners of life, and how fast change moves once a certain group of people agrees on its necessity. After one day worthy of a workout in the gym, I schlepped myself to a restaurant to join a group of Indonesian colleagues. Most of them were Muslims at various stages in their career, from an MA student to a full professor. Many of them were also active as religious leaders and regularly spoke or preached in mosques. Over the years, the number of Indonesian scholars, teachers, and students at the AAR has increased steadily. Their research findings presented in panels across the conference was of keen interest to colleagues in North America.

As we were discussing our current work in progress, all related to issues of interfaith dialogue and peacemaking, it dawned on me that in some indirect way, Mark Thomsen's vision about the Lutheran-Muslim dialogue had contributed to the steady upswing of Indonesian speakers at AAR. It was during his tenure as Executive Director of the ELCA Division for Global Mission (DGM) that sometime in the early 1990s the idea had arisen to send teachers and other professionals to countries with substantial Muslim populations such as Madagascar, Tanzania, Senegal, Cameroon, and Indonesia. My husband Paul and I ended up teaching in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population on earth. Part of my job there would be to help create a program for the study of religion at Duta Wacana Christian University (UKDW). Over the years, this program has become a feeder for the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS), and the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) at Indonesia's most prestigious State University, Gadjah Mada. It was these two programs that had sent the Indonesian Muslim colleagues to the AAR meetings.

Interfaith service: Egypt

Before making the United States my new home, I had taught at UKDW in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from 1993–1999. Prior to this, I had also worked as the coordinator of the refugee project connected to the inter-denominational, international congregation of Saint Andrew's United Church and the Anglican All Saints Cathedral in Cairo, Egypt, from 1986–1990. One day at St. Andrew's, Pastor Michael Shelley mentioned in passing that his boss, the executive director of ELCA's DGM was coming to visit our refugee project in Cairo. At that time, those words were just alphabet soup to me. Pastor Shelley and I worked at St. Andrew's Church in Cairo where I was the coordinator of the refugee work. Hailing from the Netherlands, I had no idea about church structures in the United States, but somehow I picked up that Dr. Thomsen had spent several years in Nigeria and that upon returning home he had started to act on some innovative, even radical ideas, about Muslim-Christian engagement. It was only natural then that this big boss should visit our refugee work since many of our clients were Christians and Muslims from countries in the Horn of Africa.

A few weeks later, I found myself accompanying Mark to a restaurant where we were going to have lunch. While trying our very best not to be hit by cars in the chaotic Cairo traffic, he fired off what seemed to be dozens of questions about our refugee work and how I had become qualified to be its coordinator. He was soft-spoken and unassuming, yet had an inspiring presence that was hard to forget. The year must have been 1988 or 1989, and I had no idea that one day I would be part of Mark's vision and plans for "a hundred-years" of ELCA dialogue with Muslims.

A few months later, an ELCA intern, Paul Harder, came to Cairo to work at St. Andrew's. We were eventually married at St. Andrew's and moved to Minnesota, where in the early morning of Saturday, February 29, 1992, the phone rang. It was someone from DGM asking if we would be interested in moving to Indonesia to begin teaching at the theology department of a Christian university. After putting down the phone, we pulled out an atlas to see where Yogyakarta was. We decided that we should seriously consider this offer, but began to worry about having to learn a new language.

Learning and living interfaith: Yogyakarta

We had not expected Duta Wacana University to be quite ready for our presence. We were more or less prepared to spend a year of observing and learning. However, reality quickly overtook us. Paul had to prepare for the largest cohort of Lutheran students the university ever received. Hailing from Sumatra, many of them chose to study in the interdenominational school at Yogyakarta, while waiting for an internal conflict in their own church, the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), or Batak Christian Church, to be solved. Being the only Lutheran teacher on hand, Paul had to hit the ground running.

Around that same time, Duta Wacana's Professor of Islam, Dr. Djaka Soetapa, was elected the University's president. Indonesia had only two Protestant scholars of Islam and since the second one was teaching in Jakarta, I had to take over Dr. Soetapa's classes. This baptism by fire turned out to have many advantages. Since I was now the only person designated to be "in the know" about Islam, students posed their many questions about its history, culture, beliefs, and tradition to me. Having lived in Egypt did not make me a specialist on Indonesian Islam, of course, so I solicited help from colleagues at the Islamic State

University, the Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN). Their Muslim students also had many questions about Christianity, and so we decided to swap instructors; someone from UIN speaking to my students, while I or one of the UKDW colleagues would speak to their classes.

Indonesia seemed ready for these types of activities. A visionary teacher at the Islamic State University who also served as Minister of Religion, Professor Mukti Ali (1923–2004), had translated his experience of studying under the supervision of the great scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith at McGill University in Canada,[1] into a program for the Comparative Study of Religion at the Indonesian Islamic State Universities and Institutes. While everyone agreed on the importance of such studies in a multi-religious environment, the human resources to give this vision hands and feet were sorely lacking.[2] As a result, universities that were training the future leaders and scholars of Islam had begun to encourage their students to focus on interreligious topics for their MA and PhD studies.

An array of projects that studied "how to be Muslim" in a religiously plural society had made Yogyakarta into one of the most vibrant scenes of new interpretations of the Qur'an, and its related religious texts. Students, teachers, and religious leaders met regularly to discuss the unending list of topics related to religion. The formats for such meetings ranged from small discussion groups to large international conferences. In 1991, a colleague whom we had met in the Netherlands on our way from Egypt to the United States, Sumartana had just launched an interfaith institute called *Interfidei*. *Interfidei*'s goals were to encourage and develop a pluralistic religious thinking through dialogue, to stimulate a dynamic network of dialogue and interreligious cooperation, and to encourage religious transformation as a solution to humanitarian issues faced by the society. Every week the institute held discussions on a variety of topics, from the economic woes in Indonesia to Saint Mary in Islam and Christianity. *Interfidei* was the place to be, not in the least because meetings always ended with a buffet packed with Indonesian delicacies! The institute also addressed questions that were on the forefront of everyone's mind at that time: how to counter radical Muslim ideas. I could not have found a better environment to learn about Islam and interfaith living than here.

Having to jump into teaching about Islam in Indonesia without a safety net was the reason I sought help from the Muslim colleagues at the Islamic State University. They were interested in linking up with classes of Christian students. What followed were seven years filled with exciting and fruitful interfaith learning and activities. Groups of students from each university would visit mosques or churches, celebrate feasts together, and create reading groups to study topics, such as Abraham in the Bible and Qur'an. At one point, we organized a series of seminars discussing the "five pillars" of Islam from a Muslim and Christian perspective. The excitement was palpable and ultimately attracted students to the MA program at UKDW. This program was specifically geared towards pastors working in religiously plural environments. UKDW

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) founded the Institute for Islamic Studies at McGill University, and also taught at Harvard Divinity School. He was influential in Comparative Religions. See his *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962), and *Toward a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

2. Indonesia officially recognizes seven religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and since September 2014 the Baha'i faith as well.

was an inter-denominational school, so students hailed from across the archipelago of Indonesia. Through that program, we aimed to train a new generation of Christian teachers and scholars of Islam. Upon returning to their own contexts, each of them would face very different circumstances. Thus, it made sense to allow them to focus on the interfaith questions that arose in their own dioceses. Many of our students faced extreme violence when after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998–1999 sectarian strife broke out across Indonesia. Yet, they applied the theories and practice of their interfaith studies, keeping the channels of communication open between the members of their churches and the Muslim population. By 1999, things had quieted down in Indonesia but there was much work left to do.

In 2000, the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) was launched. It was and is a unique program in the Muslim world where students of different faiths learn together and are taught by teachers from multi-religious backgrounds. The three main sponsors of the project are the Gadjah Mada State University, UKDW, and the Islamic State University. According to its website, the goal of the program is to provide MA degrees for students who "ask what each of us can learn from other religious believers that add to our own spiritual insight and heritage, to seek deeper understanding of each other, and to work together for a just and peaceful future."[3] In 2006, the ICRS program was added as a venue to the PhD degree in Religious Studies.

Two decades…

We left Indonesia in 1999 for Valparaiso University. Paul and I have now been involved in interfaith engagement since 1993, for one-fifth of Mark Thomsen's time line of "one hundred years." Back in the United States, Paul went on to do graduate studies on the Lutheran denomination of Indonesia, the HKBP. He eventually returned as a Fulbright Scholar and as a guest teacher at the Lutheran Seminary in Sumatra.

I could not but apply the valuable lessons about living in a religiously plural society learned in Yogyakarta. Just like my Indonesian colleagues, I have become a scholar-activist, and continue to be involved in all types of interfaith activities, regularly returning to Indonesia to teach, to be part of workshops, and to visit the many friends made during our time there. Professor Roland Miller, who worked for many years in India, and wrote the blueprint for sending Lutheran professionals across the globe to engage with Muslims, always insisted on the importance of "friendship."[4] Mark Thomsen's vision made it possible for us to make many new and unexpected friends in Indonesia, some of whom I now meet here in the United States at the annual AAR conference.

I do not think that we ever thanked Mark Thomsen for the hard work he did on our behalf. Nevertheless, I am sure that he feels our gratitude as it moves around the universe.

3. *ICRS* http://crcs.ugm.ac.id/profile (accessed 26 October 2014).

4. See Roland Miller, *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling: An Introduction to Islam* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996). Miller served as academic dean and professor of Islamic Studies and World Religions at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada from 1976–1993. In 1992, he was charged by the ELCA to develop a proposal for a "Focus on Islam." He founded the Islamic Studies program at Luther Seminary, which he directed from 1993–1999.

Jesus, Words from the Cross, and Ways to Explain: The Cry of Dereliction between Arabic-Christian Apology and Mark W. Thomsen

Mark N. Swanson

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Mark Thomsen was never one to shy away from paradoxical expressions. His favorite title for Christ was "the Cosmic Crucified"[1]—which presents a puzzle, on the face of it. How can one be "cosmic" in any meaningful sense while nailed to a cross? But that is precisely the question that Thomsen wanted his readers and hearers to ponder as they prepared to proclaim good news among the nations. Of course, a love of paradoxical expressions is by no means a new thing in Christian tradition. One could argue that "the Cosmic Crucified" is present, if not in quite such epigrammatic form, in a famous passage in the letter to the Colossians: the one "in whom all things hold together" is the one who was "making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:15–21, a passage that has often inspired talk of "the Cosmic Christ").[2] In the second Christian century, the apologist Melito of Sardis could declare:

> He was…carried in the womb by Mary, and clothed with his Father; treading the earth and filling heaven…; wanting food…, and not ceasing to nourish the world….He stood before Pilate, and sat with the Father; *he was fastened to the tree, and held the universe*.[3]

Thomsen's love of paradoxical expressions does not stop with "the Cosmic Crucified." The Cosmic Crucified reveals the (Almighty?) God who is *vulnerable*, who *suffers with us*.[4] And with regard to the

1. Thomsen's 1993 book, *The Word and the Way of the Cross: Christian Witness among Muslim and Buddhist People* (Chicago: DGM/ELCA, 1993), is dedicated "To all who witness to Jesus, the Cosmic Crucified."

2. See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), chapter 5, "The Cosmic Christ."

3. Melito of Sardis, Fragment 14; ed. and trans. Stuart George Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On* Pascha *and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 81–82. Emphasis added.

4. The vulnerability of God is a key theme in Thomsen's writing. See Mark W. Thomsen, *Christ Crucified: A 21st-Century Missiology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004), 19–38, or idem, *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross: An Engagement with Muslims, Buddhists, and*

terrifying word from the cross normally known as the "cry of dereliction"—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—Thomsen's commentary is as follows: "God was hidden as one who chooses not to be 'God'."[5] In the present short essay, I will focus on this cry of dereliction and a few of its lesser-known commentators, in an attempt to highlight some features of Mark Thomsen's witness and missionary engagement.

These two sides of a single vocation—the witness and the missionary engagement—can sit in a certain tension with one another. On the one hand, we knew in Mark Thomsen the *witness* to the Cosmic Crucified who delighted in unapologetically paradoxical language that presents the mystery of incarnation and redemption in its most radical form. On the other hand, we knew him as the *missionary* called to offer an explanation (*apologia*) for the hope that was in him (1 Pet 3:15) in encounters with people of other faiths, Muslims and Buddhists in particular. Both the witness and the missionary are on full display in his writings, especially *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross*. Now, unapologetic witness and credible explanation are both Christian duties, but they can work at cross purposes: the witness may be unintelligible; the explanation may fail as faithful theology. Thomsen himself recognized the tension and the difficulty this created, especially with regard to the Christian-Muslim encounter: "the God revealed and known through Jesus, the Cosmic Crucified, is not acceptable to most Muslims with whom we wish to engage. For most Sunni Muslims, suffering is not appropriate to the divine."[6]

What is striking to me in Thomsen's work is that he always strove in the first place to be a faithful witness, clinging to striking formulations of the hiddenness and vulnerability of God made known in Christ, without any attempt to tone them down in order to make them easier for "other peoples of faith" to hear. *At the same time*, he never backed away from the engagement with these "other peoples of faith," but actively sought it for himself, for those who looked to him for leadership, and for his denomination as a whole.

The examples that follow are taken from the *Arabic* Christian theological heritage, a vast corpus of material that Mark Thomsen encouraged and enabled me to study when I was a relatively young LCA/ELCA missionary to the Middle East in the 1980s and early 1990s.[7] These Arabic-speaking authors lived in contexts in which Christians were called to bear witness to and to explain their faith in an intellectual and spiritual environment shaped decisively by the Arabic language of the Qur'an and the faith and practices of Muslims. As a kind of case study in witness and apology (and in tribute to Mark Thomsen, who wanted to bring these medieval voices into a contemporary conversation), let us take a look at what a few of them had to say about Jesus' cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Other Peoples of Faith (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2008), 26–55.

5. Thomsen, *Jesus, the Word, and the Way of the Cross*, 42.

6. Ibid., 55.

7. I will always remember Mark Thomsen with gratitude for his encouragement and, through the Division for Global Mission of the ELCA, material support of my doctoral studies at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome.

Witness and apology in Arabic

The history of debate about Christ's cry of dereliction in the Arabic Christian-Muslim conversation begins almost as early as that conversation itself. For the Muslims' scripture, the Qurʾan, Jesus is a prophet and apostle of God, a member of a company that reaches its culmination in the mission of the apostle Muḥammad, the "seal of the prophets." Jesus is therefore a revered figure but he is *not* the Son of God, not divine, not one of a Trinity; to make such claims is a reprehensible confusion. For many Muslim controversialists, the cry of dereliction, along with Jesus' agony and prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, provided *biblical* evidence for their conviction that Jesus was merely human (and *not* divine); furthermore, such accounts showed them that, even according to the Gospels' own witness, Jesus was averse to his death by crucifixion (rather than freely accepting it).[8]

As a result, Christian theologians who wrote in Arabic had to address themselves to the question of Christ's agony in the Garden and his cry of dereliction from the cross, attempting to give them interpretations consistent with their claim that Christ was the truly divine (as well as truly human) Son of God who freely underwent crucifixion for the sake of the redemption of humankind. These attempts took a variety of forms.[9]

1. *al-Jāmiʿ wujūh al-īmān* ("The Gatherer of the Aspects of the Faith")

One early example comes from a late ninth-century compilation called *al-Jāmiʿ wujūh al-īmān* or "The Gatherer of the Aspects of the Faith." We do not know the name of its Chalcedonian author/editor. Chapter 17 of this compilation consists of a series of answers to thirty-three questions about the Gospels, the eleventh of which has to do specifically with Christ's word, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[10] The author begins his answer by recounting the Fall of humanity into sin and idolatry, to which God responded by "sending to them his Son, born from among them from his maidservant." He then illustrates the work of Christ with a little parable:

> A son was born to a king from his maidservant. The birth, nourishment, and growth of the king's son took place at [the home of] his mother, among his maternal uncles.
>
> The people of the kingdom rebelled [against the king] and refused obedience for a long period of time. There was no one among them who dared to seek the king's good pleasure for himself and for others, because of their offences and rebellion against him. But the king's

8. For the ninth-century convert to Islam ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, for example, the cry of dereliction refutes the claim that "Christ is the eternal creator;" from his *Refutation of the Christians*, ed. I.A. Khalifé and W. Kutsch, "*al-Radd ʿala-n-Naṣārā* de ʿAlī aṭ-Ṭabarī," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 36, fasc. 4 (1959): 115–148, here 124, lines 11–12.

9. Bibliography for all the authors and texts mentioned below can now be found in: David Thomas et al. (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (Leiden: Brill, 2009–).

10. Manuscript British Library (BL), Oriental 4950, folios 102b–103b. The translations below are Mark Swanson's. For an introduction to Chapter 17 as well as its 11th question, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Arguing from Scripture: The Bible in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in the Middle Ages," in *Scripture and Pluralism*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and Thomas E. Burman (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 29–58, here 47–56.

> son, who had been born among them, had pity on them and showed them mercy. He acquired a worn-out garment from those of the peasants, and put it on over his vesture. Then he came to the king, entered into his presence, and said: "O my Lord, how long will you avert your face from me?" And he made intercession and entreaty with him on behalf of [the people].[11]

The author now immediately applies this parable to the work of Christ.

> Because the people were abandoned, their souls [trapped] in their error, and because they had no possibility, no intellect to guide them to entreating and imploring their Creator for his good pleasure towards them, therefore Christ our Lord became a human being. He was a servant in all the ways that servants serve their lords, and in his humanity pronounced on behalf of humankind what was required of them. And he said, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" He did not say that on his own behalf, but on behalf of the people who had been abandoned in their error.[12]

There are aspects of this understanding of Christ's words from the cross of which Mark Thomsen would have approved. Christ is the incarnate Son of God who is in solidarity with sinful human beings, identifying with them and accomplishing for them what they are unable to accomplish for themselves. So far, so good. And yet, the author preserves some distance between Christ and the rest of humankind: Christ speaks on their behalf—*but not on his own behalf*. And so, the "cry of dereliction" is not really a cry of dereliction at all, but rather a cry that *makes representation* on behalf of others.[13] It was not Christ who experienced abandonment; rather, it was sinful humanity that had been abandoned to its error. Christ acts in solidarity with suffering human beings, indeed, suffers with human beings—but there is still a slight reserve in the "com-" of the Crucified's compassion. Christ is "with" people in their humanity, but not in their estrangement.[14]

2. Ḥabīb Abū Rāʾiṭah, *Fī l-tajassud* ("On the Incarnation")

Another ninth-century Christian apologist in the Arabic language was a Syrian Orthodox theologian named Ḥabīb Abū Rāʾiṭah, who hailed from the town of Tikrīt in Iraq.[15] In his treatise "On the Incarnation,"[16] Ḥabīb responded to a number of questions that were typically raised by Muslim questioners. These included a question about Christ who had "appealed for help (*istaghātha*) and sought rescue from death" (where *istaghātha* is shorthand for the cry of dereliction). Ḥabīb

11. BL or. 4950, ff. 102b–103a.

12. Ibid., f. 103a.

13. The author goes on to point to examples in the psalms where David speaks the words—but speaks them on behalf of Christ.

14. It is worth pointing out that such an interpretation is common in the Western Christian tradition, at least for the first millennium; see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 545–546.

15. Tikrīt is now part of Iraq's Sunni heartland and is known as the hometown of Saddam Hussein, but in the ninth century it was an ecclesiastical center for the Syrian Orthodox Church.

16. See Sandra Tonies Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth" in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rāʾiṭah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 217–297, here 284–295 (§§73–84). The translations given here are Mark Swanson's from the Arabic text.

begins with a standard Christian argument: Christ's agony and fear "is a verification of his Incarnation."[17] So far, so good.

But then Ḥabīb's argument takes what for us today is a disturbing turn: not only did Christ's cry from the cross verify the reality of the Incarnation, it also "established his argument against Satan and against the Jews who carried out his crucifixion and death."[18] Reading a little further into the text, we discover that this is part of a response to a dilemma-question that was regularly used by Muslim controversialists: "[Christ's] crucifixion and death: did he undergo it willingly or unwillingly?"[19] For many this seemed to be a knock-down argument, for if a Christian responded "Unwillingly," then Christ was clearly not divine. But if a Christian responded "Willingly," then it could be said that his crucifiers had simply fulfilled Christ's will, and therefore not only had no guilt, but were deserving of reward! We see clearly in the background to this the unexamined and unquestioned Christian assumption that "the Jews" were to blame for and guilty of the death of Christ.[20] The Muslims' dilemma-question is constructed in such a way as to take advantage of this assumption: it seeks to force Christians to choose between two conclusions—*either* that Christ was too weak to resist crucifixion and was not God, *or* that the Jews deserved reward rather than guilt for crucifying Christ—neither of which Christians would be willing to concede.

In his response, Ḥabīb does nothing to challenge this basic framework, but rather works within it and responds to the questioner with what is, in itself, an interesting grammatical move. A noun like "crucifixion"[21] is, in fact, ambiguous: it can refer to Jesus' crucifiers' *act of crucifying* him, as well as Jesus' experience of *being crucified*. The two can be judged in different ways. On the one hand, Jesus freely accepted being crucified, since "by it he saved the world and delivered them from the error that held sway over them."[22] On the other hand, at the same time, Jesus disapproved of his crucifiers' act of crucifying him—his cry from the cross is evidence of that. Here, Jesus' cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" is not so much a cry of dereliction as a cry of *aversion* to what his crucifiers had done—in order to establish their guilt. In the end, Ḥabīb had responded to a polemical sally with anti-Jewish presuppositions in a way that simply magnified those presuppositions.

17. *al-taḥqīq li-taʾannusihi*, where *taʾannus* literally means "becoming-human." Ibid., 284 (§73).

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 288 (§77). The dilemma-question is very common in ninth-century Christian-Muslim controversy, but the underlying problematic appears much earlier in the history of the church. For example, see Bernard Blumenkranz, *Die Judenpredigt Augustins* (Basel: von Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1946), 190 (in a section titled "The Responsibility for the Crucifixion") in reference to Augustine.

20. Note that the Muslim polemicists were taking advantage of a Christian assumption. The Qur'an criticizes those who boasted of having killed "the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, God's apostle," but then goes on to say "they did not kill him nor did they crucify him" (Q 4:157).

21. *Ṣalb*, which is a verbal noun (related to *ṣalīb*, "cross"); Ḥabīb also mentions another verbal noun, *qatl*, "killing."

22. Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth,"* (288–295); the quotation is at p. 290 (§79).

3. Al-Makīn Jirjis ibn al-ʿAmīd, *al-Ḥāwī* ("The Compiler")

It is something of a relief to turn to another text: a passage that I recently stumbled across in an Arabic-language theological/ecclesiastical encyclopedia known as *al-Ḥāwī* ("The Compiler"). It is composed by a fourteenth-century Coptic priest, physician, and civil servant named Jirjis (George). At a certain point in his career, Jirjis retired from the world, became a monk, and eventually (in the 1390s) produced his massive compilation.[23]

Jirjis's chapter on the crucifixion (Book 1, Part 3, Chapter 1) begins with an essay written especially for Christians who did not fully grasp the benefits that flow from the Cross of Christ.[24] In the course of that essay, Jirjis presented a section on the benefits of the cross for various categories of people—including the Jews.[25] They benefited in that the crucifixion was a fulfillment of Scripture, in particular, of Psalm 22. Here, we find the lines "they pierced my hands and feet" (verse 16b, LXX) and "they divide my clothes among themselves/and for my clothing they cast lots" (verse 18). Of whom was the Prophet David speaking here? Clearly, Jirjis says, not of any past prophet, but rather of the expected Messiah, who would be crucified and deliver his body to the death of the cross. And then he goes on:

> When [Jesus] was crucified of his own wise will, he raised[26] his voice to the people that was drowning in ignorance and said: "The prophecy spoken by the Holy Spirit upon the tongue of your king and prophet David—the prophecy which begins 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'—has been fulfilled."
>
> If the matter were not so, then we would be compelled to say that Christ (to whom be glory!) called to his Father for help in escaping from the cross, and that he asked him why he had abandoned him, and what was the reason that necessitated his abandonment. But that is laughable discourse—no devil believes this, let alone the believers and those who are acquainted with Christian ways of expression! [Christ's] saying "Why have you forsaken me" while on the cross cannot be understood as a cry for aid to his Father, which could be understood under the aspect of a request for information: "Why is this, and why have you forsaken me, and what necessitated this event?" These are all expressions of someone who is ignorant of the reason for what is happening to him. But, he (to whom be glory!) is exalted above such fairy-tales! That [cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"] is nothing but an allusion addressed to the Jews so that they might recall what was said in this Psalm, and to teach them that the fulfillment of the prophecies had arrived and taken place, so that no further end was to be awaited.[27]

In other words, according to Jirjis, Christ was *not* talking about himself or his experience from the cross. Indeed, it is nearly blasphemy to think that Christ could ask the question "Why?" as one who honestly did not know the answer; not even the devils are that stupid! Therefore, the cry of dereliction is not a cry of dereliction at all, but rather an act of *giving a bibli-*

23. An edition of this was published in Egypt by a monk of the Muḥarraq Monastery, *The Theological Encyclopedia known as* al-Ḥāwī *of Ibn al-Makīn* [in Arabic], 4 vols. (Cairo: Dayr al-Muḥarraq, 1999–2001).

24. Ibid., vol. 1, 304–322.

25. Ibid., 316–318.

26. Changing one letter to correct *aʿlana* to *aʿlā*.; ibid., 317, line 15.

27. Ibid., 317–318.

cal reference. It is as if Jesus were saying: "Remember the Psalm that begins, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.' Look it up! Read it! Then you will understand what is happening here, that the scriptures are being fulfilled."

Confession and explanation

These brief samples of Arabic Christian discourse may be enough to give an idea of the *difficulty* of speaking about Christ's cry from the cross in an environment in which Christians were continually challenged to defend their confession of Christ as Lord and God. There is certainly an element of confession in all these samples: their authors insist that Christ's cry from the cross is part and parcel of the divine economy of the Incarnation for the salvation of humankind. But, the simple *confession* that the one who cried out from the cross was the Incarnate Son/Word of God come to save the world was not enough in their environment; some sort of *explanation* seemed to be called for. Ḥabīb found an explanation by exploiting a dilemma-question regularly asked by Muslims—and managed to use the cry of dereliction to affirm and sharpen one of that question's presuppositions, namely, that the Jews were to be held guilty for Jesus' death. Jirjis and the author of *al-Jāmiʿ* did not latch on to some already existing piece of Islamic discourse in this way. However, they seem to have decided that acceptable explanations for Christ's cry within the Islamic environment needed to keep God on the one hand, and the experience of dereliction on the other, *separate*. And, they found explanations that fit the bill. Jirjis' Christ was giving information, not actually asking "Why?" of the Father (a possibility at which he simply scoffs). Rather, Christ was always in perfect control. The Christ of *al-Jāmiʿ*, like the disguised prince in its parable, was interceding on behalf of *others* who experienced dereliction, but not for himself.

The way of the cross

Mark Thomsen chose a way other than that of apologetic explanation. He confessed "the Cosmic Crucified," the one in whom "God was hidden as one who chooses not to be 'God'," and allowed those statements to stand *without* explanations that might soften their paradoxical character by putting some distance between God and suffering. But Thomsen did not leave matters at that. Instead of *formulating explanations for* Christ crucified (like those Arabic theologians above), Thomsen called for *conforming lives to* Christ crucified. The truth of the confession of the Cosmic Crucified is not to be found in analyses, but in lives lived in faithful conformity to Christ. The "word of the cross" must inform and lead to the "way of the cross."

And at this point, Thomsen in fact comes close to many of the medieval Christian theologians who wrote from within the Islamic world, in the Arabic language. They regularly insisted that a critical witness to the truth of Christianity is *the lives of its adherents*. In a study of a number of ninth-century theologians, including Ḥabīb, I once wrote as follows:

> The Christian life, they remind us, has a particular shape: not of reliance on violence, but of turning the other cheek; not the pursuit of wealth and status, but of self-giving and contentment; not of license, but of discipline of the appetites; not of zeal for tribe, but of embrace of all nations.[28]

28. Mark N. Swanson, "Apology or its Evasion? Some Ninth-Century Arabic Christian Texts on Discerning the True Religion," in *Christian Theology and Islam*, ed. Michael Root and James J. Buckley (Eugene, Ore,: Cascade Books, 2014), 45–63, here 63.

Several centuries later, the monk Jirjis added his witness—throughout his encyclopedia, but also in his essay on the benefits of the cross. After speaking about the benefits of the cross for all people, for the Jews (of which we read a snippet above), and for the Christians, he returns to a *general* benefit: the power of the sign of the cross.[29] When I first encountered this passage, I remember pausing with some apprehension. I did not know what to expect next. So often in Christian history, the "power of the sign of the cross" has been explained in *military* terms, in keeping with the story of Constantine's vision of the cross with the legend: "In this, conquer"! This interpretation had staying power, even in unlikeliest of places. For example, an Arabic debate text set in the court of the great Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn has a Christian bishop make the claim that "no king departs to battle his enemy [taking] with him the emblem of the cross, except that with victory and triumph he would have possession of his enemy."[30] But the monk Jirjis has nothing like this. For him, the sign of the cross gives power over the Devil—and, through the reminder of Christ's self-giving, patience and strength to endure through persecutions, even "to the extent of the shedding of blood."[31] Here, the benefit of the cross is strength for a cruciform life.

In the end, for the medieval theologians presented here and for Mark W. Thomsen, the most effective demonstration of the power of the cross does not consist in words, whether paradoxical or plausible, but in lives transformed.

29. *al-Ḥāwī*, vol. 1, 320–322.

30. Wafik Nasri (trans.), *The Caliph and the Bishop. A 9th Century Muslim-Christian Debate: Al-Maʾmūn and Abū Qurrah* (Beirut: CEDRAC, Université Saint Joseph, 2008), 215, *verset* 377, translation slightly adjusted.

31. *al-Ḥāwī*, vol. 1, 320–321.

Christian Ministry within a Religiously Plural America: The Importance of Christian-Muslim Relations within Theological Education

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Sitting at a desk in Dakar, Senegal, after having spent the day with ELCA missionaries who live and work in a Muslim-majority country, Mark Thomsen reflected on why the ELCA has a presence in that country and what form of mission their witness takes.

> Christian mission among Muslim people is carried out for the sake of reinterpreting for Muslims the Christian understanding of the gospel. As Christians we feel compelled to share that our Trinitarian language, in contrast to tritheism, is spoken in order to maintain our witness to the unity of God. Our incarnational language, rather than *shirk* (associating partners with God, for Muslims the greatest sin), affirms that Jesus is truly human and not some ethereal phantom or ghostly spear. Further, our incarnational language witnesses to our conviction that we have encountered the Word of God in the total person and mission of Jesus and not just in his prophetic message.[1]

Almost thirty years later, we might reflect again on Christian witness to Muslims, this time not in the Sahel of West Africa, but in the environs of North America. Thomsen's interest in re-defining global mission for the ELCA back in the nineties is still an important project for a church that has latched onto an important but vague theological and missiological mantra as a "missional church."[2] In this article we would like to explore the impetus for such an encounter with Muslims not "over there" in some far-off place where the

1. Mark W. Thomsen, "Christian Mission within the Muslim World," *Word & World* vol. XVI, No. 2 (Spring 1996), 196–197.

2. Thomsen was the driving force behind a "Focus on Islam" in the ELCA that grew from his previous commitments in the American Lutheran Church (ALC). He organized and edited *God and Jesus: Theological reflections for Christian-Muslim Dialog* (Minneapolis: DWMIC: ALC, 1986) and then developed the ELCA "Commitments for Mission in the 1990s" found in Mark W. Thomsen, *The Word and the Way of the Cross: Christian Witness Among Muslim and Buddhist People* (Chicago: Division for Global Mission, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 14–19, 111–125. See also David D. Grafton, *Piety, Politics and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 225–230.

church can send missionaries who cross geographical and cultural boundaries but "here" in the midst of our own communities, congregations and families. It is not possible to undertake Christian ministry in North America today without recognition of, encounter with, and sensitivity to, a wider variety of non-Christian religious traditions; Islam being one of the most important. The 1980s and 1990s produced a handful of theologians and ecclesiastical leaders who were attentive to interfaith dialogue or encounter with a variety of different religious traditions "over there." However, the training of leaders today requires an approach to ministry that recognizes the reality of persons of other faiths not only in the communities in which we live, but the ministries in which we work, and the families to which we belong.

The 2010 U.S. presidential election highlighted the dramatic demographic changes within the United States, prompting many pundits to note with "concern" the growth of Latino voters, the Black caucus, and the rise of Arab-American blocs. Long before this election, however, Harvard Professor Diana Eck's research on the *New Religious America* brought to light the amazing ethnic and religious diversity already then fully present within the citizenry of the United States.[3] While it might be tempting to relegate the topic of religious pluralism to an elective course in seminary for those who are of like-minded interfaith specialists, the reality is that all of our ethnic and religious diversity is experienced within reach of a typical middle-class, Anglo Lutheran congregation. Others will certainly be more qualified to comment on the ministerial encounter with Buddhists, Hindus, or Jews in American settings; hence, we will limit ourself to the Christian-Muslim encounter.

Questions about Islam

A pastor walks into a church committee meeting and is handed a hard copy of an email chain by a member with the heading, *Muslims demand shar'ia*" and says, "Pastor we must do something!"

While innocently shaking hands with parishioners after a rather benign Sunday morning service, one member bluntly asks, "Pastor, is Allah the same as the God of Jesus Christ?"

In meeting an Imam from the mosque across town for the first time he asks flat out, "Please explain to me how the Trinity is nothing less than the worship of Three Gods?"

Each one of these scenarios was a real event. Many leaders in the church have certainly experienced similar encounters. Responses to these questions require some knowledge, skill, and sensitivity. They entail more than simply an arming of oneself with apologetic arguments or retreating into defensive retorts that smack of racism, ethnocentrism, or even hate speech. To be able to respond to the dramatically changing social and religious dynamics in our communities and families; rostered leaders, seminarians, and lay church leaders need to be able to witness to the loving crucified God "molded by humility, vulnerability, and servanthood," as Thomsen has said.[4]

When there is so much for a church leader to do, or for a seminarian to learn and experience, why take up their time with what for some may seem at best as an interesting hobby or elective topic, or at worst may be seen as a liberal agenda that demonstrates the abandonment of the

3. Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian country" has now become the world's most religiously diverse nation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).

4. Thomsen, 196.

universal claims of the gospel? There are three important aspects of why the study of Christian-Muslim relations is vital for ministry today: theological, sociological, and pastoral.

Theological

Islam is one of the major world religions to have appeared after Christianity. Because of this, Islam has posed particular theological problems for the church. As one prominent missionary among Muslims had agonized often, how could God allow a significant portion of the human community who had heard the name Jesus refuse to accept his salvific role and allow them to thrive?[5] This is complicated by the fact that the Qur'an does explicitly recognize Christians and has an important place for Jesus, albeit from within its own theological convictions. Christ's identity is based upon the "Prophetology" of the Islamic scriptural and theological tradition.[6] In addition, the Qur'an explicitly contests the crucifixion of Jesus, the divinity of Jesus, and the Trinity. It is important, then, to understand these Islamic claims not only for reasons of reactive defense or to engage in proselytization, but because they are challenging and thought-provoking questions in their own right. These questions may help us be more effective witnesses to the crucified Christ in whom we profess faith in and of themselves. When we talk about *Perichoresis*, *Begotteness*, *Personhood,* and *Procession* publicly in our communities, do we actually know what we mean? The Islamic critiques of the Divinity of Jesus and the Doctrine of the Trinity are not specific only to Muslims, but the agnostics and atheists of our society as well. Their questions and critiques are well worth our consideration. Two examples will suffice.

The Trinity and the divinity of Jesus

Surah Nisa' of the Qur'an records this:

> *People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him. So, believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a 'Trinity'—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only one God, He is far above having a son* (4:171 [Abdel Haleem trans.]).

This passage directly critiques the Christian claim of the Trinity. The theological problem for Muslims is that Christians have claimed more about God than either God or his Prophet 'Isa ever intended. The underlying Islamic concern is for upholding the Unity of God (*tawhid*); that there is only one God and that this God is sovereign above all else. The Christian profession of the Trinity *seems* to subvert the sovereignty and unity of God.

Since the seventh century, Christians have been attempting to convince Muslims that we do believe in only one God and not three gods (Tritheism). One Muslim scholar who was unconvinced by Christian scriptural and theological arguments for the Trinity was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). In a treatise that has been attributed to him, *Al-radd al-jamil li-ilahiyyat 'Isa bi-sarihal-injil* [A Fitting Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus], al-Ghazali uses the "High Priestly" prayer of Jesus in John 17 as his starting point. He asks several important questions about this text.

Al-Ghazali points out that if we are

5. See W.H.T. Gairdner, *The Reproach of Islam* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1909 2d ed., rev.), 4–5.

6. See Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

to take the priestly prayer of Jesus literally that he is one [*wahda*] with the Father, then why do Christians not accept that the disciples are ontologically one with Jesus as He is one with the Father in the same manner? Did not Jesus pray that the disciples would be one with him as he was with the Father (17:21)? If the Son is of the same essence as the Father then logically are not the disciples of the same essence [*dhat*] as Jesus and therefore a part of the Trinity? Naturally, al-Ghazali is pointing out the absurdity of this claim. He argues that Jesus' words of "oneness" should logically be taken metaphorically and not in any ontological manner.[7]

Another critique of the Christian claim of the divinity of Jesus (and by extension of the Trinity) comes from Sura Ikhlas:

> *Say: God is One, the eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him* (112:1–14 [Abdel Haleem trans.])

While Muslims do believe that Jesus was born from a virgin (3:35-62; 19:22–36), this event does not prove Jesus' divinity, but rather points back to the fact that God as the Creator can create out of nothing as God wills [*kun wa faya kun*] (19:35). In fact, Muslims have often responded to Christian arguments of divinity that if the birth of Jesus, who was born of a woman but with no earthly Father, is indicative of his divinity, then what of Adam? He was born neither of an earthly Father nor of an earthly Mother. Then logically, Adam would be even more divine than Jesus would.

The point here is that Muslim scholars have taken seriously Christian claims of the Trinity and divinity of Jesus. They do not understand how Christians can make such assertions, and provide very logical arguments in response to our paradoxical claims about God. While these critiques have often been the source of inter-communal hostility, in this author's view such critiques are good opportunities for us to think clearly about our own beliefs. What better way is there than to teach seminarians and public leaders of the church about the major doctrines of the faith, than by posing these clear living Islamic critiques? When asked by Muslim interlocutors about the Trinity and divinity of Jesus, it simply will not do for missional leaders to shrug their shoulders and say, "It is a divine mystery." Muslims will not accept this, nor will the agnostic, atheist, and unchurched folk in our communities who do not understand such orthodox Christian claims either. These challenges provide opportunities to think about issues about how the gospel is articulated and heard in our pluralist America. Such discussions, internal and external, are good teaching moments for us to better reflect on our own faith as well as be more articulate, not only with Muslims but even ourselves. This is what Mark Thomsen did so well.

Sociological

The second aspect of the importance of engaging Christian-Muslim relations as part of the theological education of future leaders in North America is sociological. Here Diana Eck's work, *A New Religious America*, is extremely helpful. While some parishioners might claim never to have met a Muslim (and I have had several make such a claim), the reality is that most of our ministries and parishes of the church encounter Muslim Americans and their communities in their own great diversity:

7. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-radd al-jamil li-ilahiyyat 'Isa bi-sarihal-injil* (Paris: Leroux, 1939), 7–8. Further helpful responses to this issue can be found in Mark N. Swanson, "The Trinity in Christian-Muslim Conversation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 256–263.

be they African-American Muslims, "Immigrant" Muslims, or Anglo converts; be they doctors, lawyers, engineers, or politicians. Muslim organizations, mosques or communities are part of American civil society, from Indiana to San Francisco, St. Paul to South Beach and they might be important partners for the common good in communities.

Because the current atmosphere of *Islamophobia* continues to look upon all Muslims as a threat or at least a potential threat to Western society (and to American values in particular) it is vitally important that public leaders take clear stands against prejudice, racism, hate crimes, and fear that will ultimately lead to scapegoating whole communities.[8] A powerful example of just such courageous acts occurred in 2013, when *Rabbis for Human Rights—North America* and *Sojourners* in New York City, publicly demonstrated against the anti-Islam posters organized by Pam Geller that appeared on the New York subway system.[9] In October 2014 the Religious Leaders Council of Philadelphia, an interfaith forum of over 30 different religious communities in the Philadelphia metro area published a unified statement denouncing the hate speech of such public ads.

Unfortunately, Lutherans, especially those of German descent, know all too well what happens when whole groups of people are labeled by a society as a danger or a threat. Many congregational members have told stories at coffee hours about relatives and friends who stayed back in Nazi Germany or those who could not get out. The strong commitments to Jewish-Lutheran relationships in North American have grown not only from our own communal guilt over Luther's anti-Semitic tracts, but also from our repentance of the reality of ghastly human sin. While incomparable to the horrors of the Holocaust, a generation before World War II German Americans felt the brunt of harsh accusations of being un-American in violent anti-German crackdowns after the passage of the Espionage Act of 1917. Germans were charged with being spies for the Kaiser and being "un-American."[10] With these experiences in our own past, what will a congregation do when an African-American store front mosque a half mile from the church is vandalized by graffiti sprayed over its façade? What about the Pakistani immigrant mosque that has its windows blown out one night by an angry drunk man? How will the missional leader respond?

A recent study by the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, engaged in a survey of 4,000 Episcopal church clergy and 1,700 of its own VTS alumni about their personal and communal engagement with Islam and other faiths.[11] The research demonstrated two

8. The term "Islamophobia" was coined by the British organization Runnymede Trust in its 2000 study, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2000) (http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/projects/past-projects/meb/report.html) [accessed June 13, 2014). See also The Muslim Public Affairs Council, *Islamophobia* (www.mpac.org/issues/islamophobia.php) [accessed June 13, 2014].

9. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/09/anti-muslim-ads-new-york-city-subway-american-freedom-defense-initiative_n_2438881.html (accessed 18 February 2014).

10. See David D. Grafton, "German Lutherans and Assimilation: Lessons in the Current Atmosphere of Islamophobia," *The Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (May/June 2011) [http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/May-June-2011/German-Lutherans-and-Assimilation.aspx#_ednref1].

11. See David T. Gortner, Katherien

primary reasons why their Episcopal church leaders and alumni participated in relationships with other religious communities, or provided educational opportunities about other religious traditions for their congregations. The first reason was the leader's previous educational opportunities with other religions. Ninety percent of those who offered educational forums on another religious tradition in their congregations "had previous education in that religion" in their training. The report states: "an Episcopal church leader's education in other faiths is almost a pre-requisite for education in our parishes about other religions."[12]

The second reason was proximity. The VTS study found that most Episcopal church leaders engaged in some form of interreligious education with other religious institutions that were within five miles from their own congregations. However, 65 percent of the Episcopal congregations in the survey were more than five miles away from the local mosque, negatively affecting interaction.[13] In other words, if there was not a mosque in close proximity, the congregation would not engage with a mosque or Islamic center. This poses a number of challenges for the ELCA.

If we look at the 2011 Pew Research Study on Muslims in America, we note that many American Muslims are either African-American or immigrants from South Asia who have migrated to the U.S. for reasons of economic livelihood in the last twenty years.[14] If we compare this with the demographics of the ELCA, which is still predominantly Anglo and middle class, we can easily speculate that ELCA congregations will be located in areas that are very far removed (geographically and economically) from a mosque or Islamic center. Unless a congregation is intentional about engaging with a Muslim community, which is usually racially, ethnically, and culturally different from its own origins, there is a very slim chance that any form of education or relationship will happen. Given that the largest single ethnic community of U.S. Muslims is African-American, we must also acknowledge that racial tensions and sensitivities are part of the Christian-Muslim relationship in America. Because the majority of Americans still share negative feelings and views about Muslims, these perceptions will not change, but will be exacerbated with the ongoing problems in the Middle East and central Asia.[15]

Church leaders involved in any social ministry organization or those within Word and Service ministries have, and undoubtedly will, engage American Muslim communities as participants, co-sponsors, or supporters of their particular social ministries. Those who serve in congregations or Word and Sacrament ministries have, and undoubtedly will, engage Muslim communities as part of civic associations. How will public leaders navigate these

Wood, and J. Barney Hawkins IV, "Faithful Christians, Faithful Neighbors: How do Episcopal parishes relate to other faiths – especially Islam?" *Virginia Theological Seminary Journal* (December 2013): 57–66. The authors indicate a near 20 percent response rate from alumni (59).

12. Ibid., 61.

13. Ibid., 60.

14. The Pew Research Center, *Muslims in America: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (2007), 13 (http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/) (accessed June 16, 2014).

15. Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, *Religious Perceptions in America: With an In-Depth Analysis of U.S. Attitudes Towards Muslims and Islam* (Dubai, United Arab Emirates: Gallup, Inc., 2009), 8.

interfaith relationships within the civic space? These interactions are not just theological and spiritual matters. It is not only about seeking esoteric interfaith dialogue, whatever form that may be. Rather, these relationships will more than likely be intercultural, interethnic, interracial, and across economic gaps. How will missional leaders help their own communities engage those who are very different, not only for the sake of proclaiming the gospel, but also living out the gospel in "humility, vulnerability, and servanthood"? The best chance for any positive interaction will be from those leaders that have engaged in some form of previous intercultural, interfaith educational opportunities.[16]

Of course, some will ask about Muslim extremists, such as those being recruited by jihadist groups. How are we to guard against potential violence? Certainly, extremist religious violence should be addressed in our society like any other violent crime. (Lutherans have always been good at recognizing the first use of the law as necessary for civil order.) While the New York City police secret surveillance program of Muslims resulted in a prominent debate about the violation of civil rights (and certainly there are others), most Muslim communities around the country are actively involved with law enforcement at some level in subverting crime.[17] *Islamophobia*, however, assumes that American Muslims are NOT interested in the well-being of their own local communities and undermining American values. Pastoral encounters with local Muslim communities are an important sustainable response to such assumptions, and provide opportunities for a robust civil society, what Putnam and Campbell call "bridging."[18]

Pastoral

As important as the theological and sociological aspects of Christian-Muslim relations are, the third is the most practical. In her book *'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America,* Naomi Schaeffer Riley notes that in 1988 15 percent of U.S. homes were composed of spouses from different faith traditions. In 2006, the percentage rose to 25 percent. Riley comments that according to the *American Religious Identification Survey* of 2001 that "27 percent of Jews, 23 percent of Catholics, 39 percent of Buddhists, 18 percent of Baptists, 21 percent of Muslims and 12 percent of Mormons were then married to a spouse with a different religious identification."[19] Contrary to previously accepted assumptions that most people marry within communal and religious boundaries, Riley remarks that according to the *National Study of Youth and Religion* that less than 25 percent of those

16. The ELCA Multicultural Ministries Handbook, *Talking as Christians Cross-Culturally* (http://resources.elca.org/Evangelism-Talk_Together_as_Christians_Cross-Culturally.html) provides helpful guidelines for engaging other communities of different ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds and can be used for interfaith engagement as well.

17. For example see Jaweed Kaleem, "Muslims Rally In Support Of NYPD Mosque Surveillance Program," *Huffington Post* February 24, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/05/muslims-rally-nypd-mosque-surveillance_n_1321363.html) (accessed June 16, 2014).

18. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 526–534.

19. Naomi Schaefer Riley, *'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6. See also http://www.youthandreligion.org/.

in the 18–23 age bracket believe that "it's important to marry someone of the same faith."[20] Once our son or daughter marries a Muslim, it is no longer about "them."

Because of the multi-faith, multi-ethnic shape of American society, our church leaders *will* face pastoral questions from parishioners, co-workers, or clients in social ministry organizations. These interfaith encounters within our own families or communities do not only entail theological or sociological issues, but practical ones relating to the daily life, such as; "Pastor, my daughter is in love with a Muslim. What do I do?" "Pastor, there are a few people waiting for a homeless meal who want to know if we can provide *halal* food."

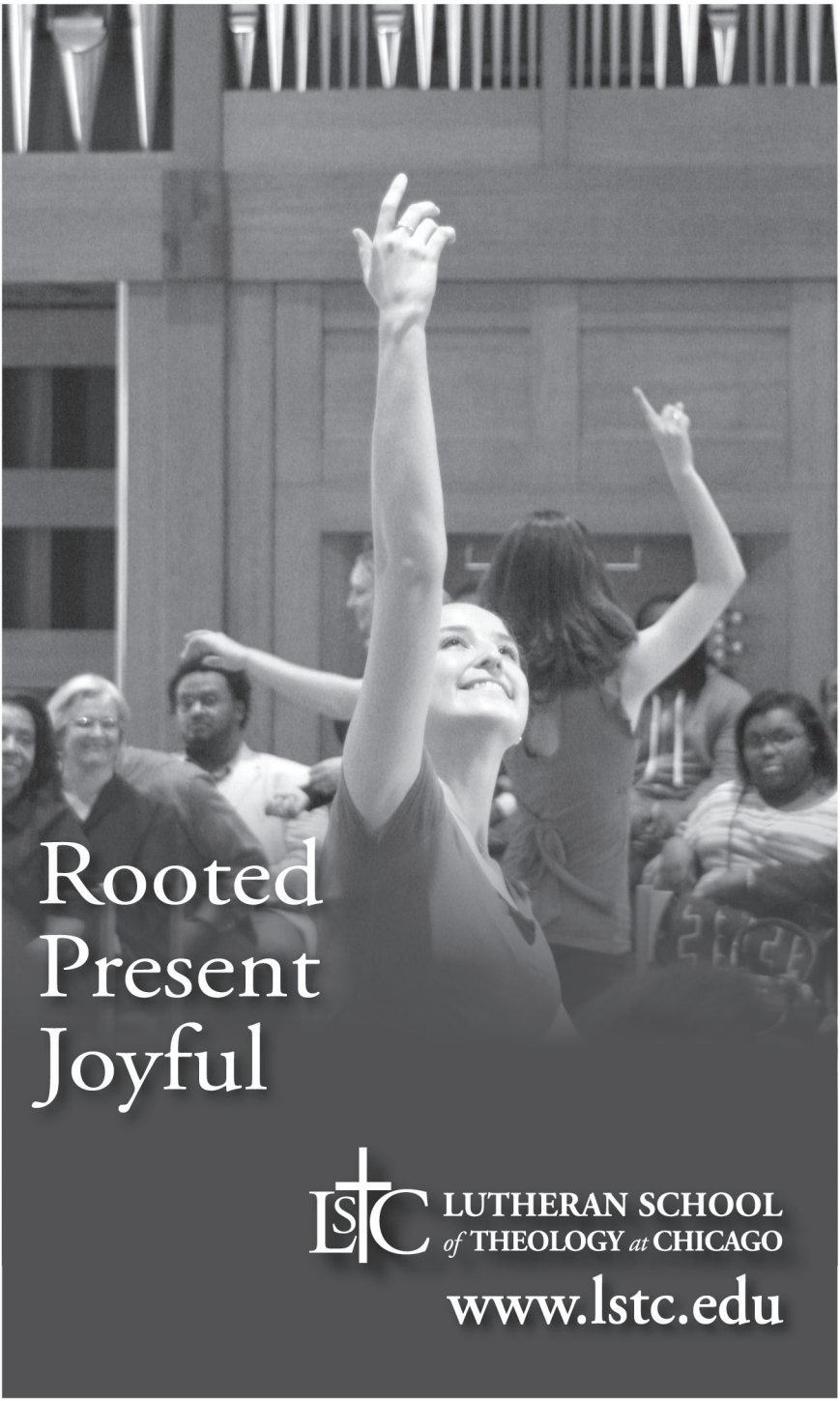
What will you do if a child in your Sunday school brings their friend, Ahmad who is an unaccompanied minor to vacation Bible school? How will Ahmed be welcomed or treated? You are asked to offer a table prayer at an Iftar of a member of your congregation who is in an interfaith family. Will you pray in the name of the Triune God? The local hospital calls and indicates that there is a Muslim woman who has requested prayers before her impending death. In the accepted practice and policies of hospital chaplaincies, what manner of prayer will you offer at her death? God forbid, there is a shooting in front of the local mosque. Whom do you contact?

People of other faiths are engaged in relationships with members of our congregations and ministries on any number of levels. They may be compatriots and partners working on any number of causes within our local communities, or they may be the targets of hate speech, racism, or violence. While our rostered leaders may respond to these events "by the seat of their pants," how much better would it be if our missional leaders had been prepared to respond to such interfaith encounters grounded in the loving crucified God "molded by humility, vulnerability, and servanthood"?

Conclusion

Looking back over his years as the Director of DGM, Mark Thomsen reflected on Christian-Muslim relationships in Senegal and the role of the ELCA mission there. Almost thirty years later his thinking is as vital for us as ever. The ideas and lessons that he gleaned from those who have crossed geographic and cultural boundaries "over there" are as valid for a missional church in North America that locates itself in a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial, and multi-religious nation "here." We hope that our public leaders would have had the opportunity to think through thoughtful responses that might reflect the presence of the crucified Christ long before they actually face such events and questions. What form and shape will "cruciformed" and faithful ministry take in such an interfaith American context?

20. Naomi Schaefer Riley, "Interfaith marriages are rising fast, but they're failing fast too," *The Washington Post* Sunday, June 6, 2010, (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/04/AR2010060402011.html)][accessed 26 February 2014]. See http://www.youthandreligion.org/.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Book Reviews

Contemporary Muslim and Christian Response to Religious Plurality. By Lewis E. Winkler. Wipf & Stock, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-6089-9742-8. ix and 350 pages. Paper. $39.00.

Lewis Winkler, a lecturer in Theology, Church History, and Ethics at the East Asia School of Theology in Singapore, has produced an imaginative work on Christian-Muslim dialogue. Building upon the oft-quoted saying of Hans Kung, "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions," Winkler puts forward an opportunity to help Christians and Muslims think outside the box and engage in fresh thinking. Winkler commences his project within the framework of "religious pluralism," that is, the reality of various faith traditions, each making its own truth claims, to "encourage more democratically free, morally just, and religious plural human communities" (10). He follows this with a review of a historical and thematic survey of twentieth and twenty-first century Christian-Muslim dialogue in Chapter Two.

The heart of Winkler's exploration are Chapters Three through Five. Here he elucidates the theology of the Christian theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and the Muslim scholar, Abdulaziz Sachedina. Pannenberg's Trinitarian theology is explored primarily through his work in *Toward a Theology of Nature.* Sachedina's thinking is reviewed through a close reading of *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism.* Ultimately, Winkler concludes that through Sachedina's understanding of the Islamic concept of *fitra*, and Pannenberg's notion of "prolepsis" there is affirmation of God's good work through humanity (230–231). The final two chapters of the book seek to apply Winkler's hopeful, but critical, notions of interfaith dialogue, as gleaned by both Pannenberg and Sachedina, to traditional Christian and Muslim doctrines, as well to several important sociological issues, such as the treatment of religious minorities, women, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (310–311).

One might wonder why Winkler has chosen to put these two individuals into dialogue with one another. These scholars never met, nor did they ever engage each other's works. Pannenberg himself never wrote specifically about Christian-Muslim relations. Furthermore, the book wanders through a variety of theological topics. More focus—to produce a tighter work—would have been helpful. Nevertheless, this book is a creative reflection on two important Christian and Muslim thinkers.

Winkler is not interested in engaging in Christian-Muslim dialogue merely to rush to the least common denominator in order to agree upon a doctrine of God, or so that communities might simply "play nice." Rather, through his own Christian evangelical commitments, he argues that open and honest dialogue about theological matters provides opportunities for communal engagement that might strengthen the civic good. This certainly is a perspective that should be applauded and supported.

David D. Grafton
The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

Can Only One Religion be True? Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue. Edited by Robert B. Stewart. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9928-4. 272 pages. Paper. $24.00.

Can Only One Religion be True? The question appears to be rhetorical. Whether or not this question expects an answer, readers are alerted that a rather limited perspective for the discussion of pluralism has been set in place. Rendering the dialogue to an either/or framework will easily force readers to take sides on the issue.

What do we expect from a dialogue between a Catholic (known as a mutualist) and an evangelical (in a liberal stream)? Yes, more labels are found throughout the book. There

is just no way to know if these labels achieve mutual respect and greater mutual understanding. When it comes to the uniqueness of Christianity, the evangelical circles put much emphasis on the idea of salvation. It gives an impression that the debate is reduced to soul-saving; whereas, this idea of salvation is not necessarily the focus of other religions' attention. The discourse of difference constructed for the theology of religions unfortunately divides groups into "us" and "them." If the discussion of religion is rested upon the discourse of difference, a dialogue on culture and pluralism will only be comparing apples to oranges. The disposition of dialogue remains egotistical. To craft effective dialogue, Stewart and his cohorts may want to acknowledge that dialogue is not an end in itself. Dialogue is a way of living that sets out for a genuine exploration of truth. It requires courage to turn challenges into opportunities for faith transformation.

One should not, however, deny Stewart's editorial skills of compiling the materials in a concise manner. The book is a collection of papers presented at the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum in Faith and Culture, including a transcript of the dialogue between Paul Knitter and Harold Netland. It provides basic concepts to the field of religious pluralism and theology of religions.

Man Hei, Yip
The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross. By Andrew Root. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. ISBN; 978-1-4514-7815-0. xvi and 311 pages. Paper. $39.00.

This book is a study in "practical theology," a discipline that seeks to connect theology with church practice. This book is unique in that it counters secular trends in the discipline. In opposition to voices that focus solely on the contributions of the social sciences to practical theology, Root seeks to honor "evangelical experience," in which people claim that God is active in their lives. Based on the testimonies of lay people from two Pacific Northwest congregations, Root shows that they imply a "realism" with respect to God: God is active in molding their faith journeys. For Root, ministry then is at the intersection of where God meets people's needs. He articulates a "Christopraxis practical theology of the cross" that honors Jesus' continued ministry and sees ministry as helping people discern how God is working in their lives. The key for deciphering God's role in people's lives is the doctrine of justification by faith, for which Root appeals to the contemporary German theologian, Eberhard Jüngel. Jüngel's approach to justification by faith teaches us to honor God's work with people as relational, personal, and embodied. God's justifying work reorients believers such that they can serve as Christ in their congregations and communities. Root maintains that people need to nurture a critical awareness with respect to their experiences; they need to acknowledge that believers can be misguided about their experiences with God. Hence, they need to be vigilant with discerning whether and how God is working with them. This book is helpful for working pastors, counselors, and judicatories because it is sensitive to "hands-on" ministry. In my view, the book would be enhanced if it were also to acknowledge that God's work is embodied precisely as word and sacrament. But in general Root acknowledges that human experience with God is discerned best within the primary narratives of the scriptures and the gospel.

Mark Mattes
Grand View University

Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East. By Christopher B. Hays. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-6642-3701-1. xxvi and 425 pages. Paper. $45.

Serious readers of the Old Testament have long used compendia of Ancient Near Eastern writings, such as ANET and COS, to learn more about the Bible's world and culture. In general, however, those collections

leave readers on their own to figure things out, often a daunting task.

Hays presents modern translations of a smaller number of ancient texts but provides interpretations of these texts and how they are similar to or different from their biblical parallels. The discussion of each text ends with reflection questions (often quite challenging) and a bibliography for further reading.

He identifies four goals of his book: to make intelligent comparison between biblical and Ancient Near Eastern texts possible; to give a wider view of the texts themselves (discussions of genre or the meaning of the whole text when a text has been excerpted); to provide starting points for analysis and comparison; and to open up avenues for motivated readers to explore further. The author does not take a strong ideological stance so that users who use critical methods of Bible study and those who do not can both profit from this book.

The twenty-five major categories of documents are arranged according to the Pentateuch, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, and Writings. They include familiar texts like the Babylonian creation and flood stories, the Code of Hammurabi, and ancient treaties/covenants, but also parallels to prophetic symbolic actions and oracles against foreign nations, prayers, hymns, and laments. Photographs of eight Near Eastern images that enhance our understanding of the Bible are included as well. Some texts, of course, have opposite readings of history, such as Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem in 701 as reported in his royal annals and the quite opposite outcome of that battle in the Bible. I would have been a bit more forthright about the contradiction between these texts, but the approach of Hays will keep the discussion going, and he concedes that this event remains subject to critical judgment and that readers need to wrestle with such texts and clarify methods and presuppositions.

This will be a wonderful textbook, but it will also benefit all readers who want to go deeper into the meaning of the Old Testament in its ancient context.

Ralph W. Klein
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The Political Aims of Jesus. By Douglas E. Oakman. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8006-3847-4 . xiii and 192 pages. Paper. $26.00.

This volume by Douglas Oakman, professor of religion at Pacific Lutheran University, focuses on the "political Jesus"—the historical peasant theologian who engaged the power arrangements and economic realities of Palestine in his day. Oakman views this work as an act of recovery since later Gospel layers interpret Jesus after his death as the risen Christ who will return as the eschatological Son of Man, not primarily as the peasant figure concerned with economical and political transformation and restoration.

Oakman develops his tightly argued thesis in six chapters. In the opening chapter he revisits the eighteenth-century scholar Reimarus who pictured Jesus as a *worldly* Messiah with political aims that were interpreted quite differently by his later disciples. By sketching interpretations down to the present, Oakman shows how subsequent interpreters (including Albert Schweitzer) largely ignored Reimarus' political emphasis, casting Jesus rather in eschatological and spiritual terms. Since 1980, however, scholars active in the current quest for the historical Jesus with their focus on archaeological evidence as well as primary literary sources (e.g., Josephus, Roman and New Testament writings) and with their use of social theory and models have elucidated more clearly "Jesus' first-century, Palestinian context, and in terms that are consonant with Israelite traditions" (16). Growing awareness on that context, Oakman suggests, demands taking Jesus' political agenda seriously.

In chapter two, David Christian's social-scientific model of "agrarian civilizations" is adopted as most useful in interpreting first-century Palestine. These were societies based on agriculture in which patronage of the elite in the state-urbanized areas (cities) controlled peasant labor and surpluses by tributes and taxes. He places Jesus and his political action squarely within the Galilean peasant class, a class both necessary to and exploited by the ruling elite.

Chapter three discusses the changes in power arrangements within Palestine and more narrowly within Galilee under the "aristocratic politics" of Herod Antipas, which fostered social stratification, control of land and peasants by use of taxes, warfare, and conscripted labor, and improvements in infrastructure benefiting the elite, not peasants. In that context, Oakman views Jesus as a peasant theologian who employs "Kingdom of God" as his fundamental political metaphor and brokers this present power of God to subvert political arrangements and to provide social restoration through healing. Chapter four employs the metaphors "tables" of the bankers and the "table" of Jesus to signal Jesus' opposition to "mammon" as representing the economic politics of the Roman Herodian world, primarily in his advocating by actions and words cancellation of debts for the desperately poor. This verbal and enacted opposition led to Jesus' crucifixion as a *lēstēs* (common thief and rebel).

Oakman concludes with two chapters—chapter five representing his explanation of the layers of interpretations after Jesus' death that rendered Jesus in apocalyptic terms and eventually as the cosmic savior, and chapter six summarizing his overall argument.

Scholars versed in the current quest will benefit most from this book. Other readers, unless they are aware of the tedious work done by scholars to isolate the earlier layers of the Gospel tradition might get lost in the argument's details. Oakman builds much of his case on this recovery of the earliest version of the Q document as representing the most accurate portrayal of the historical Jesus. Near the end of the book, the author states candidly, "Jesus was not accurately portrayed by his later followers. His 'message' was a worldly engaged politics of resistance. His followers transformed that message after his death into something that Jesus himself probably would have rejected" (131). Was there so great a disconnect between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus as Oakman concludes? His portrayal of Jesus is minimalistic—a non-Messianic figure who did not speak in apocalyptic terms. Rather, for him, "Jesus was a worldly and world-engaged peasant artisan" (132). Whether or not there is such discontinuity between Jesus and the later interpretation in the New Testament, the emerging picture of a Jesus engaged with the economic and political realities of his time and place is needed in our own day. A spiritualized Jesus will not do.

James L. Bailey
Wartburg Seminary

Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography. Edited by Pete Ward. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6726-1. viii and 254 pages. Paper. $36.93.

In this edited volume, twelve scholars offer diverse perspectives on ecclesiology and ethnography as methods for theology. These distinct voices are not edited into uniformity, but stand in contrast, conflict, and lively dialogue with one another. The layout of this book enacts its purpose: the first section proposes, in four differing voices, that ecclesiology needs qualitative research practices. Then the book opens to a wider community, and eight scholars, employing various types and degrees of empirical research, contribute to the conversation on ecclesiology and ethnography.

However, the purpose of the book is not finished on the last page; instead, the book depends on its readers becoming that ever-widening community of conversation partners. Since the authors claim that, "ecclesiology arises from a theological situatedness in the church," (Ward, 3) there is an insistence that you—the people of the church—have privileged access to ecclesiology and theology. Therefore, it is the lay people, the pastors, and the teachers of this church who are ideally positioned to enact the work of ethnography within their own communities.

The use of the term "ethnography" as a general term for empirical research could be misleading for the reader who either expects this book to contain ethnographies or takes this book's contents to define ethnography.

Instead of descriptive work based on individuals' lived experiences, this book, while it does admirably employ empirical data, remains largely normative and theoretical. However, the reason behind the use of the term is good: these authors have noticed that for too long, theologians have verbalized support for the use of empirical research, yet, most religious scholars do their research primarily, if not exclusively, apart from the people impacted by their research. The brilliant impulse of this book is to enact a conversation that embodies research that gets closer to people than theories ever do—through listening, and accompanying, and breaking bread.

Jan Rippentrop
Emory University

Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich. Edited by Dean G. Stroud. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6902-9, xii and 203 pages. Paper. $20.00.

This impressive collection details how preachers responded to the rise of National Socialism in Adolf Hitler's Germany. Stroud's compendium includes sermons from famous Confessing Church leaders, such as Bonhoeffer and Barth, as well as the works of otherwise ordinary pastors who ministered in an extraordinary time.

Stroud's introduction details the historical context in which the Third Reich arose, as well as how "German Christians"—a theological movement within Germany committed to Hitler's cause—recast Christian theology in terms palatable for Nazis. In particular, Stroud explores the ways in which Nazis utilized a particular vocabulary to exert control on the German *Volk*, as well as disempower other guiding narratives, particularly those of Christianity. Woven within this discussion, Stroud depicts the rise of the Confessing Church as an orthodox response to the German Christians, a theological subversion of National Socialism, and a movement with an alternative language to Nazi speech. The included sermons exemplify these markers of the Confessing Church.

Each sermon Stroud presents lifts up one way to preach as one opposed to an oppressive state in a particular context. Some respond to the atrocities of *Aktion T4*, the governmental program of euthanasia for those deemed unproductive, and thus unworthy, members of society. Others, given the Sunday after *Kristallnacht*, condemn the demolition of Jewish life by Nazis. Still others reveal how preachers responded to the invasion of Poland and the turn against the U.S.S.R. At each turn, we see how pastors sought to edify congregations in the midst of a context hostile to Christianity. Further, each speaks with a unique prophetic voice that seeks God's reign rather than the rule of a false Führer.

Readers will not only find powerful examples of gospel proclamation, but will see how the sermon may faithfully confront systems of oppression in the political and social realm.

Andrew Tucker
Christ Lutheran Church, Radford, Va.

Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea. By Samuel L. Adams. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-6642-3703-5. xiii and 252 pages. Paper. $35.00.

The task Adams accepted is a difficult and crucial one: how do we understand the social and economic realities in Judea, from about 530 B.C.E. to the destruction of the Second Temple (dedicated in 516 B.C.E., remodeled and expanded by King Herod, and destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.). During these six centuries Judea fell under the following imperial powers: the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and the Romans. The only exception to imperial domination was the century during which the Maccabees and their successors ruled.

Adams arranges his results in five chapters: family life and marriage, the status of women and children, work and financial

exchanges, taxation and the role of the state, and the ethics of wealth and poverty in wisdom literature and apocalyptic. His principal sources are the Bible, including the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, the Elephantine archive (fifth century), the Zeno Papyri (third century), the Dead Sea Scrolls, and archaeology. The biblical evidence is very helpful, but of course social and economic information is often incidental to the biblical authors' agendas.

Family life was patrilocal (the wife moved into the husband's household) and patrilineal (inheritance passed from father to son). Originally the husband paid a bride price to the wife's father, but eventually a dowry system developed, with payments from the wife's family to the husband's family. In addition to theological issues, there were also financial consequences to intermarriage with outsiders, with a potential of net loss of financial resources. Adams notes the significant roles played by women in subsistence farming and also in cultic matters. Children in ancient times were treated as small-scale adults, quite different from the freedom granted them in modern society. Daughters faced more limited options than sons. Both wives and female children were in vulnerable positions.

Agriculture was tenuous employment. By the time grain was set aside for next year's planting and for taxes to foreign countries, there was less than one-third that could be consumed. Coinage developed during the Second Temple period, and interest on loans was very high. Creditors were often free to change the terms of a loan at any time. Usury was high. Two of the upwardly mobile vocations were those of the scribe and the priestly class. Throughout this study the financial crisis reported in Nehemiah 5 plays a major role.

The tax system under the various empires was very onerous. Nehemiah declined to take the taxes contributed to previous governors, but he was in no position to reduce the taxes granted by the Persians. Under the Ptolemies and the Romans, local Judean citizens engaged in tax farming, making sure that the imperial powers, local governors, and the priestly class were adequately funded. The tax farmer himself often became extraordinarily wealthy.

Adams writes clearly and engagingly, and provides helpful summaries at the end of every chapter. Given the importance of these centuries for the development of early Judaism, the life of Jesus, and the realities of the early church, it is hard to overestimate the importance of these social and economic factors. Alas, there is still much that we do not know.

Ralph W. Klein

The Cambridge Companion to Pentecostalism. Edited by Cecil M. Robeck Jr. and Amos Yong. (Cambridge Companions to Religion). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-5211-8838-8. 356 pages. Paper. $29.99.

The Pentecostal/Charismatic movement has dramatically spread across the globe in the last few decades. Scholarly interest in the history, theologies, and practices of the Pentecostals has increased as well. The publication of more than 300 monographs and journal essays every year in the last decade reflects this heightened interest. Pastors and seminarians interested in the study of Pentecostalism no longer need to flip through hundreds of titles. Cecil M. Robeck Jr. and Amos Yong, professors at Fuller Theological Seminary, have collected fifteen essays written by experts in the field in this Cambridge Companion. These essays analyze the history of Pentecostalism, its various expressions around the world, and various ways to study the tradition.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section traces the multiple origins of modern Pentecostalism and analyzes its globalization. It introduces various historiographical proposals, examines the growth of Charismatic tradition within the "mainline" churches, and identifies its recent expressions. The second section explores the expressions of Pentecostalism in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. While underlining the heterogeneity of this transnational movement, the authors subtly and skillfully identify its connecting threads and themes. Considering

cases from around the world, the final section demonstrates how Pentecostalism can be studied through various disciplinary lenses, such as sociology, theology, and cultural anthropology.

This Cambridge Companion provides a clear and comprehensive introduction to the Pentecostal tradition. Written by seventeen respected experts, the book brings voices and cases from around the globe. It is comprehensive in investigating Pentecostal beliefs and practices. It analyzes Pentecostalism's history and present, approaching the subject from multiple disciplines. This book is a useful introduction and reference tool to pastors and seminarians interested in understanding Pentecostalism.

James Elisha Taneti
Campbell University

Shopping for Meaningful Lives: The Religious Motives of Consumerism. By Bruce P. Rittenhouse. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-6203-2114-0. xii and 211 pages. Paper. $25.00.

Rittenhouse argues that consumerism is an existential meaning strategy, and therefore has been misunderstood by every major attempt to confront it. If the church is to counter consumerism, it must propose a Christian existential meaning strategy.

Rittenhouse identifies five types of theories about consumerism's cause: greed, status signaling, manipulation by advertising, "imaginative hedonism" (the consumer imagining what she could do with a commodity), and "parental concern" (competition over resources required to meet perceived needs of children). Rittenhouse evaluates these with empirical data, such as savings rates among U.S. adults, the reported happiness of U.S. Americans, and changes in employment status and income. Rittenhouse finds that the data do not justify any of the five types of theories, but they do support his theory of consumerism as existential life strategy.

Rittenhouse does not make enough of his most recent sources on existential meaning strategies. His chief theological source for existential theology is Paul Tillich, chiefly backed by Alfred Adler and Erich Fromm. The reader could easily think that Rittenhouse is repristinating the theology of the 1950s. However, the hinge of Rittenhouse's argument occurs in Chapter 5, where he cites Tim Kasser's work in psychology (from 2004), which demonstrates that people "primed with thoughts of death, guilt, or meaninglessness are more likely to display consumeristic values and desires" (147).

The question of existence did not die with Paul Tillich. Rittenhouse sees Tillich's theology as a starting point for theological attempts to counter consumerism with Christianity. Within the confines of the argument Rittenhouse is spot on, although for the sake of his argument he can narrow definitions, sometimes to absurdity. For example, he rejects postmodern opposition to consumerism because his definition of "postmodern" is "consumerist." Therefore any postmodern opposition is logically incoherent. Nonetheless Rittenhouse does make a powerful case for an existential Christian opposition to consumerism.

Timothy Andrew Leitzke
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How to Get Your Sermon Heard: Preaching to Win Minds and Hearts. By William Hethcock. Sewanee, Tenn.: Plateau Books, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-9814-7954-5, 330 pages. Paper. $25.00.

Hethcock's *How to Get Your Sermon Heard* provides a valuable contribution to the homiletical conversation. While this may first appear as a textbook for introductory preachers, the most experienced homiletician will find valuable content within.

Hethcock begins with an approach to preaching that always originates with the Bible. Scriptural interpretation is vital for Hethcock's method, for, in his eyes, Christian sermons must arise from the Christian scriptures. Yet, he also demands deep attention to context.

Thus his Four Step Method: exegesis of the text, evaluation of the human condition in the textual context, evaluation of the human condition in the present context, and proclamation of the word to the present context. Hethcock guides the reader to begin with the text, consider the text's authorship and audience, and then consider the preacher's particular location in order to develop a proclamation that remains biblically faithful and yet contextually compelling.

Next, Hethcock launches into a number of particular preaching tasks, whether textual or situational. He provides salient advice on how to preach on complex books like Revelation and the Gospel of John, as well as how to approach the Old Testament as a whole. He also provides helpful advice for the contexts of marriages and funerals.

Hethcock discusses two vital points in this book that contribute significantly to the field. First, he devotes an entire chapter to the role of imagination in preaching. He provides examples and compels preachers to utilize their own imaginations—not only in exegetical interpretation but in sermonic presentation.

Perhaps equally important is Hethcock's reaffirmation of narrative preaching, sometimes called the "New Homiletic." In short, he suggests that the most effective sermons utilize a captivating plot that fittingly communicates the word to the people gathered.

For a valuable refresher or a first time introduction, *How to Get Your Sermon Heard* offers a fantastic resource for all preachers wishing to hone their craft.

Andrew Tucker

Briefly Noted

In ***Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation*** (Minneapolis: Fortress, $49.00), Stephen Long presents the unlikely friendship between mid-twentieth-century theologians Karl Barth (Reformed) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (Roman Catholic) with the intent of reigniting current ecumenical dialogue between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Long shows that throughout his career von Balthasar took Barth's doctrine of God and the divine attributes with the utmost seriousness, largely because he saw Barth offering a portrait of God as beauty—the most important divine attribute for von Balthasar. Von Balthasar found that Barth's work on Anselm paralleled his own appreciation for the "analogy of being," which argues for the inter-relatedness of creatures based on their desire for the Creator. Highly technical, this book is most fitting for Barth or von Balthasar scholars.

Mark Mattes

Preaching and the Personal. Edited by J. Dwayne Howell. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-6109-7826-2, xii and 158 pages. Paper. $20.00.

This collection offers a valuable resource for those wondering how to faithfully manage the personal dimension of preaching God's word. The text includes papers originally given at the annual gathering of the Society for Biblical Literature. Each author explores a different perspective of personal engagement, including aspects of performance, testimony, memory, gender, and culture. Some look at the appearance of personal dynamics in biblical texts, particularly John's gospel and Leviticus. While readers will likely find some chapters more relevant to their particular context, the offerings of each author deserve consideration for how we, as personal beings, engage in the practice of preaching.

Andrew Tucker

Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday in Lent –Seventh Sunday of Easter

Engaging the Texts—Welcome to the New Editor of Preaching Helps!

Note: *On behalf of the whole* Currents *editorial staff, I am delighted to welcome Barbara K. Lundblad as the new editor of Preaching Helps. We introduced her more formally in the last issue, in eager expectation of the first publication of Preaching Helps under her leadership. That time has now come! As she introduces herself and expresses gratitude to the authors who have written the commentaries for this issue, we express gratitude for her leadership and for her own lively commentaries on several lectionary texts in the pages below. We trust that you will find them deeply engaging and helpful as you encounter the texts in relationship to your own lives and contexts of ministry.* Kathleen Billman

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This is my first issue as editor of Preaching Helps and I am honored to begin this work with all of you. I say "with all of you" because preaching is never a solitary task but one done in the company of colleagues and congregants. Also I will be looking for writers for future issues of *Currents* and I'm happy to receive your recommendations. We know there are many preaching resources available in print and online. What we try to do in *Currents* is offer brief comments that are accessible and easy to take along wherever you are working on a sermon. Long-time readers may notice that I have changed the name of the first section of Preaching Helps to "Engaging the Texts" rather than "First Reading." The former title seemed confusing since that is also the name of the first lectionary reading and whenever possible, writers will comment on all three readings and sometimes the Psalm as well.

I recently retired from Union Theological Seminary in New York City where I taught preaching for seventeen years. Before that I served as a parish pastor in northern Manhattan and as campus pastor at two New York City colleges. In spring 2015 I will teach preaching at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. I am grateful to Karyn Wiseman and Brad Froslee for accepting my invitation to write during a very busy time at the end of the semester and the beginning of Advent.

The Rev. Dr. Karyn L. Wiseman is Associate Professor of Homiletics at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. An Elder in the United Methodist Church, she pastored congregations in Kansas and New Jersey for fifteen years. She received a Ph.D. in Liturgical Studies from Drew University with a concentration in preaching. Her most recent book, *I Refuse to Preach a Boring Sermon: Engaging 21st Century Listeners*, was published in 2013 by Pilgrim Press.

The Rev. Brad Froslee serves as pastor with the people at Calvary Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. Brad grew up on a farm near Vining, Minnesota, and studied at St. Olaf College and Harvard Divinity School. He has a passion for preaching and worship, community connection, and grace as a springboard to action.

God bless your preaching and your listening as we move into the holiest season of the church year.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Psalm 51:1–12
Hebrews 5:5–10
John 12:20–33

Engaging the Texts

Jeremiah: Covenant language is an important part of the Hebrew Bible. Readers of the entire story in this testament learn of moments when the covenant was lived faithfully and moments when the people of God betrayed the covenant and failed to live into it. This is much like what we continue to do today.

"Covenant," as detailed in the Bible, is defined as the agreement between God and the ancient Israelites, in which God promised to protect them if they kept the law and were faithful.[1] The covenant between God and God's people is one that gets played out throughout the history of both Jews and Christians. The covenant that has been prophesied in chapters 30 and 31 of Jeremiah is now detailed in a more explicit nature. Unlike previous covenants, which have been displayed on stones, this covenant will be written on people's hearts. This is a profound image for preaching. Knowing that God's promises are not simply a contract written out in legal terms, but are carefully and consciously written onto our hearts can be a transformative reality for those who hear this message of grace. Helping listeners hear the difference between "contract" and "covenant" would be important.

Psalm: In this text we read of David's confession of sins and his repentance for those sins. He is pleading with God for forgiveness and the second chance that comes from the cleansing of one's transgressions through salvation. In golfing, a player can get a "do-over" by claiming a "Mulligan." Receiving a "do-over" in life is a profoundly important moment. We all are sinful and are in need of a "Mulligan." We receive this through the love and grace of God. We receive this through the power of the salvific acts of Jesus. We receive it by naming our sinfulness and being repentant for that sinfulness. Claiming that forgiveness is a vital step.

Gospel: In this reading, individuals who are not part of the Jewish community come to see and hear Jesus. They have come because they seek him. They had, like many during those days, heard of his teaching and healing. For all we know, they might have been friends with Philip. The grain of wheat needing to die in order to flourish is an element of nature that many would have been very familiar with. This reading also alludes to the reality of Jesus' own life that will be played out over the next few weeks through the readings during Holy Week. The allusions to his coming death are clear, but there is an homage to the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus as well. When a voice from heaven proclaims the glory of the Son, we are once again reminded of the past glorification and the glorification to come.

Pastoral Reflections

Preaching throughout the season of Lent can be incredibly enriching and powerful. We live in a culture that is profoundly image-rich and the texts during Lent are image-rich as well. We think and remember through images. Preaching sermons that are centered on images and use descriptive language can bring

1. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/covenant (Accessed November 30, 2014).

listeners into our preaching in important ways. Utilizing the power of these images as a preacher can add rich dimensions to the preaching moment and provide entry points for those in our communities of faith.

In the Gospel text, as well as the baptism and transfiguration stories alluded to in the imagery of the text, and in the covenant language of the Jeremiah text, we see and hear God "naming and claiming" God's beloved. One of the most blessed moments in pastoral ministry, for me, is to baptize someone. Naming that person as a "Child of God," claiming them for and within the community of faith, and placing the water on their head is a significant moment for the initiate, their family, and for the congregation. But for me it is also a profound and spiritual moment. The joy of being God's representative in these events has brought me to tears. The first baptism I ever performed was of two teenagers who came to faith through our youth ministry program. We all cried throughout the baptism. These young people had names, histories, and families, but being publically claimed as children of God for the first time was a powerful event for us all. These ritual experiences are special. The readings today once again take us to the claiming of God's beloved. Being beloved by God can lead us to a transformed life.

Stepping into the pulpit on this fifth Sunday of Lent, the images and threads of covenant, repentance, and claiming are quite powerful. But these diverse threads can feel disjointed and can lead to a sermon that is focused on too many different ideas. Discerning the primary focus is one of the most important steps preachers can take in helping their listeners engage the sermon. So pick one theme, one image, and one main thing. Let it shine. There are obviously links between these images, but the preacher has to make choices. What do your people in your pews need to hear? How can you best relate those images to them—through story, poetry, or images? Be aware of the contextual needs of your people and craft a sermon that addresses their needs.

Karyn Wiseman

Palm and Passion Sunday
March 29, 2015

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Philippians 2:5–11
Mark 11:1–11 (Palms)
Mark 14:1–15:47 (Passion)

Engaging the Texts

Isaiah: The clarity of trust in this third Servant's Song, despite dealing with difficulty, is a testimony to faithfulness that few of us can exhibit. The phrase "morning by morning" reminds me of the lyrics of the hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness."

> Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
>
> Morning by morning new mercies I see;
>
> All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
>
> Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me![2]

The promise of God's persistent love each and every day is one that has potential to bring comfort despite all we face in our daily lives. We may not always feel that love, but it is there nonetheless.

2. https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/19 (Accessed on December 10, 2014).

Palms text (Mark 11): Jesus rides into Jerusalem as David or Solomon might have entered the city to shouts and praise, but this strange king is on the back of a lowly colt. This is an image that most people in the congregation are familiar with. The allusion to the humble entry depicted in Zech 9:9 is evident. The people along the road were chanting Psalm slogans celebrating the entry of a king, but this leader is to be different from what anyone expected.

Passion text (Mark 14 and 15): The story of Jesus on the way to the cross is a multi-faceted look at a week's worth of events and encounters: an anointing, a meal with friends, a trial and the cross itself. The opening image is of Jesus being anointed by an unnamed woman with very expensive ointment. The extravagance of this act portrays—for the reader and the listener—the ability for us all to be extraordinarily extravagant in our love for and care of others. Jesus proclaims that this woman's story will be remembered forever. What a phenomenal witness of grace. The move from Bethany into Jerusalem was dictated by Jewish law as the Passover meal had to be consumed within that city.

During the meal, the disciples are told of the upcoming betrayal of Jesus by one of his most trusted companions. Judas was not predestined to betray Jesus. He made his own choice and we, too, make our own choices in life—some good and some bad. As the week progresses, we see more intense scenes in the Garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, and the trial. All of these events bring us to the final acts of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Many people today know more about this story from movies like *The Passion of Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* than they do from experiencing Holy Week services.[3] For this reason and others, engaging this Gospel text as Mark has written it becomes vitally important.

Pastoral Reflections

Preaching on Palm/Passion Sunday can be an issue for the preacher. There are so many rich texts and vivid images from which to choose that the task can become overwhelming. Knowing the focus of your message, whether palms, passion, or some combination of the two, is imperative.

There are a number of reasons to read and incorporate both the palm and passion texts. The reality is that some people will not attend all of the Holy Week services planned for your community of faith. Providing an opportunity for them to hear both sets of texts before they return for Easter Sunday is very important. However, simply reading all of the texts for this week can feel daunting, let alone preaching a sermon with so many foci for the day.

The preacher has to make a decision. Is the reading and hearing of the Gospel narratives with a very brief message enough in your context? Is there an expectation that you preach on all of the texts? Or is it possible in your community of faith to read all of the texts, preach a sermon of typical length, and know when church is over—it's over—without complaint if it "runs over"? Know your context as you begin this week's preaching preparation and lean into that.

Themes for this Sunday could include the image of journey. The journey through these texts is a complicated one, as is the journey that Jesus takes through this final

3. http://www.gbod.org/resources/palms-or-passion (Accessed on December 2, 2014).

week of his life. Another possibility is the use of juxtaposition between the crowd shouting "Hosanna" at the beginning of the week and the crowd shouting "Crucify" later in the week. One might also use the relationship between bitter and sweet as a way to talk about the highs and lows of the week's events by using the meal images in the texts.

We can all too easily identify with those who might be labeled as fickle in their choices as depicted in these readings, both the crowds and the disciples. But it is important to hear the presence of God and God's faithful acts in the life, suffering, death, and coming resurrection of Jesus. God is active and evident in these narratives. Jesus is not a helpless victim in all of this. He is the protagonist. He announces his death and interacts with the Jewish and Roman characters in the story.[4] Seeing God, in the person of Jesus, acting decisively in his own drama is something important to note for our listeners. We, too, must be active participants in our own journeys of faith. And, like Jesus, we are not alone on this trek.

Karyn Wiseman

Maundy Thursday
April 2, 2015

Exodus 12:1–4
Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19
1 Corinthians 11:23–26
John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Engaging the Texts

Exodus: The Exodus passage includes part of the instructions for the Passover meal. The communal nature of the meal, especially for families not large enough to have a lamb on their own, sets up this week's readings with the theme of holy meals. The lamb is an important part of the meal, not just because it is on the menu, but because it is the lamb's blood that is to be sprinkled over the door to mark Jewish homes to protect their first-born sons from the angel of the Lord. The gift of deliverance and protection of the Jews was a gracious act by God and the yearly Passover meal was to be honored as a reminder of this grace.

1 Corinthians: The words in this text may be some of the most familiar in all of the New Testament, particularly to those who have grown up in the church. These words, profoundly echoed in our Eucharistic liturgies, guide us to the table of our Lord. The words are so well known that many could and probably do recite them internally along with the presider when they are spoken from the table. Regardless of how your tradition understands Eucharistic theology, this act of remembrance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a pivotal liturgical act that connects all who partake with the saints eternal and the gathered community. The words are powerful, but the physical act of eating and drinking is profoundly important.

Gospel: The narrative of Jesus' Last Supper with the disciples has been depicted by some of the most famous artists in history. This meal is one of the key moments of the disciples' collective experiences. We are reminded in John's text that they were gathered for a meal, but in the midst of it they received an astonishing blessing when Jesus washes their feet. In this act we witness the humanity, humility, and love of Jesus. He rises from the table to

4. Mary Margaret Pazdan. "Passion Narratives" in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2008), 94.

wash the disciples' feet and in that one moment we are reminded of how we are to serve and sacrifice for others. But, like Peter, we want to turn the table and wash the feet of Jesus instead.

Love is the final piece of this reading. Jesus has first modeled servant love, but then he speaks emphatically that the new commandment he brings is to love one another. In doing so people show their discipleship to him. This is the crux of the Gospel narrative.

Pastoral Reflections

Babette's Feast is one of my all-time favorite movies. The film is about a young French woman who comes to work for two Danish sisters in a small village. Babette wins the lottery and chooses to use her winnings to cook an extravagant feast for the sisters and their friends. What follows is an amazing visual feast of cooking and eating. The reserved Danish guests do not want to enjoy the meal, but the extraordinary feast is impossible to ignore and they succumb to the astonishing magnificence of the meal. Likewise, the meals in this week's texts, the Passover and the Last Supper, are meals that have lasting and profound importance for both Jewish and Christian communities.

Meal metaphors invite connections to peoples' lives. Family and friends gathering around a meal are almost commonplace in many cultural contexts. We gather for meals for holidays, birthday celebrations, special occasions, and for other reasons. Meals in my family are loud and exhilarating. They can be joyous and at times complicated. But we always look forward to them. Utilizing the meal metaphor of the readings for this day is not only easy, given the threads of connection between the various texts, it is expected. And that is absolutely the right thing to do. We also connect the meals in the texts with our most ordinary daily meals. Jesus is present in these meals, too.

The other primary image from the texts is Jesus' washing of the feet of the disciples. Many people are incredibly uncomfortable with the act of foot washing—and I'm among them! Feet are body parts that many of us hide within socks and shoes. When a foot-washing ritual is suggested, we're the ones who hang back and hope no one notices that we never came forward. Allowing another person to touch our feet is bad enough, but to be subjected to someone washing our feet is too much. Hearing about Jesus doing this is a powerful reality. Jesus knew what was coming. He announced, "The hour has come to depart," so he was clearly aware of all that was to come (v. 1). And in the midst of dealing with his own feelings, he stopped to serve the ones who followed him.

Helping your listeners pause in the midst of their own lives to serve others in every way possible would be a significant message to deliver from the pulpit. Helping your community of faith live out their faith with a servant attitude and participate in vital, physical, and humble service sometimes requires concrete examples of ways to do that. Providing these concretizations from the life of the community, from the wider context of our world and your church, and from the individual lives of your people will go a long way to help them live into this call. Living faithfully and loving fully is what this new commandment is all about.

Karyn Wiseman

Good Friday
April 3, 2015

Isaiah 52:13–53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16–25
John 18:1–19:42 (or Mark 14:1–15:47)

Engaging the Texts

The *Isaiah* text is the fourth "Servant Song" in the book of Isaiah, usually called the Suffering Servant text. In this text we sense the patterns of sinfulness, redemption, judgment, and grace that are part of the story of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament. This text is about the long-awaited Messiah, but it is not specifically about the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Preaching the gospel into this text does not do justice to the Hebrew narrative, but it is still hard not to "hear" Jesus as we read the text. Attend with integrity to the realities of the context of this passage in its time and place.

The suffering servant of God is lifted up in this text. The song expresses a number of differing realities: he is exalted, he sacrificially cleanses, his words will not be honored, and he will give himself over to pain and sickness. The powerful reality is that this chosen servant of God will bear our pain and sickness—willingly. The servant will suffer for our sins and we will be healed. Whatever your theory of atonement, this is the crux of the passage—the assurance that our sins will be removed and our pain and sickness will be healed. At the end, this passage also states emphatically that the servant will triumph over death (53:10–12). However, it is the self-giving nature of the servant that is so powerful for most readers and listeners.

Gospel: The Gospel passage for Good Friday includes the betrayal, arrest, and trial of Jesus as well as the crucifixion narrative from John's gospel. Evidently the garden where Jesus was arrested was a place that the disciples had visited before with Jesus, as Judas knows the place well. This familiarity is striking. Using a familiar place to betray a friend and leader is frightening. Who among us has not encountered betrayal of one kind or another? But this is another layer of betrayal.

John's gospel is extremely helpful in bringing the reader into the physical realities of Jesus' suffering and death. Many scholars describe Christ's death as taking less time than was typical of others who were crucified signifying that he willingly gave up his life on the cross.[5] The crown of thorns, the nailing of his body to the wood, and the piercing of his side are vivid reminders of the suffering he endured. This fact taken into proper perspective means more to the listener even in the modern era.

Pastoral Reflections

Good Friday is one of the most profound and sobering moments in the cycle of the Christian year. Being given the opportunity to preach on this holy day is both a privilege and an honor. On this most solemn day, preaching means telling the story. For many who are part of the church, Good Friday is one of the days of the liturgical calendar that holds the most meaning. In the midst of this service they feel both the depths of despair and the heightened awareness of what is to come. For others, for whom being present in this service of darkness and death may be new or problematic, the feelings may be raw and uncertain. Preaching needs to be sensitive to the emotional range that may well be present in the room.

5. Accordance Bible Software commentary on John 18:1–19:42.

We live in a world of such pain and suffering. People are killed by rampant gun violence. Black and brown lives are relegated to a "less than" status far too often. Women are paid less and forced to hear others denigrate their bodies and choices. Relating to the suffering in these texts can help our listeners connect to the pain and suffering of Jesus, which can be pivotal to hearing the message. Often we feel distance between Jesus and our own lives. This is a moment when our own experiences and the suffering of others can lead our congregation members into the story in a more personal manner.

Preaching on these very familiar texts can be both a blessing and a curse. Acknowledging that many know these texts quite well and will come with assumptions and understandings of their own will be key. You as the preacher have the opportunity to speak something new and intriguing into this situation. Connecting the garden images of the Hebrew creation story and the garden of Jesus' arrest might be an important image for you to develop. Perhaps the relationship between the suffering servant and the suffering Christ is your leading motif.

One of the questions about preaching on Good Friday is how to end the sermon and service. Leaving people with the discomfort of loss and death is a powerful way to send them into the emotional reality of Holy Saturday and then to Easter Sunday. The final piece of this passage is the placing of the body of Jesus in the tomb by a secret disciple, Joseph of Arimethea, and Nicodemus. This loving act seals the story and leaves off in a world without a Savior. The hope and promise is that Jesus will be resurrected, but for now he is gone and we have to sit in that darkness.

Karyn Wiseman

Easter Sunday
April 5, 2015

Acts 10:34–43 or Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–34
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Mark 16:1–8

Engaging the Texts

All four Gospels along with the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary include women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb. The presence of the women "is a non-negotiable part of tradition…"[6] While the names and the number of women vary, Mary Magdalene is always there. Three women are featured in Mark's account. These three women were remembered by name at the cross (15:40) and two of them saw the place where Jesus was buried (15:47).

Mark's resurrection story seems rushed—like the first verse of his gospel. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." There isn't even a verb! Mark's resurrection story ends with the word *gar*—"for." That ending feels unfinished and it didn't take long for others to add a shorter ending, then a longer ending! But Mark's original ending wasn't haphazard but very well planned. The grammar and syntax of Mark 16:8 show a carefully constructed verse in two parallel parts:

> The final *gar* creates an especially abrupt ending to the gospel. However, the author has artfully shortened the clauses to wind the syntax down toward the *gar*. The two halves of v. 8a each have six words in Greek; the two halves of v. 8b wind down to four words, then two….[7]

6. Joan L. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 39.

7. Ibid., 15.

Mark created an unfinished ending. He's pointing beyond this story and wants the reader to move beyond the story, too. That little word *gar* isn't a mistake, but a word that leaves readers on the edge of their chairs, tipping forward. New Testament scholar Joan Mitchell sees the women's silence as an intentional strategy in Mark, opening a space for the reader to respond:

> The women's concluding silence creates generative potential space…in which readers and hearers can respond. The empty tomb and the fear and silence of the last disciple characters surviving in the narrative bring the readers and hearers to their own thresholds of faith, to the limit of words to speak the unspeakable, to the limit of story to make the absent One convincingly present, and to the limit of human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death.[8]

Pastoral Reflections

We are closer to these three women than to any other resurrection story. They didn't see Jesus (at least not in this story). We haven't seen Jesus either. The empty tomb proved nothing except that Jesus was gone. Let these women be afraid and perhaps we will allow ourselves to be afraid also.

But there was something else. "Galilee." That's what the man in white said: "Go back to Galilee." The young man had been quite specific. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." But the women fled, filled with terror and amazement. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And that's where Mark's story ends.

Now the text doesn't say it, but they headed for Galilee. We can be quite sure of that because some time after this, they must have said something to somebody. They headed for home. Something happened to them in Galilee as it had happened before. Oh, we can argue that they went out believing because they had seen the tomb empty. But what sort of evidence is that? The empty tomb could only be the source of endless speculation, never the source of faith. These women went to Galilee and Jesus met them there. How? What did he look like? What did he say? Mark tells us none of these things. But it was more than the memory of an empty tomb that broke their silence. Here's another question: Why would anybody remember the testimony of these three women? There was no reason under the sun to remember those whose voices had absolutely no authority. Their testimony was next to worthless in verifying anything, let alone resurrection. Only something deeper than terror could break their silence. It happened in Galilee. It always does.

For Galilee is the place Jesus is going—ahead of us, just as Jesus went ahead of them. Easter morning moves us out of the graveyard toward Galilee, the place Jesus has promised to meet us. We always want more evidence than we have. If we are honest, we, too, are filled with terror and amazement. "Who will roll the stone away for us?" is not an old question. Who will roll away the stone of doubt? How will we know this Easter gospel is true? What will finally assure us that this good news is not preposterous?

We stand today with these three women. They didn't know the answers either. But they headed toward Galilee. They knew without saying a word that this was the direction faith was taking them. As pastor/novelist Frederick Buechner said,

8. Ibid., 114.

"We want to know who Jesus is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is."[9]

Barbara Lundblad

Second Sunday of Easter
April 12, 2015

Acts 4:32–35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1–2:2
John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

Thomas always comes on the Sunday after Easter whether we're in Year A, B, or C. Lectionary planners knew this story needed to be heard every year, but before we get to Thomas, a quick look at the other readings.

Acts 4 is seldom quoted by defenders of capitalism! In the Acts community "no one claimed private ownership of any possession, but everything they owned was held in common" (4:32). Of course, Luke was not describing Rome or the United States, but a community of Jesus' followers centuries ago. We hear echoes of Acts 2:42–47 at the end of the Pentecost chapter. There, too, the believers had all things in common, sold possessions and distributed to those in need. A significant difference in Acts 4 is the heightened role of the apostles. Those who sold possessions are called to lay the proceeds "at the apostles' feet." The apostles will then distribute goods to those in need. Some have argued that this sharing never happened–it was simply a utopian vision of the early church; however, this text is followed by two stories that make the picture quite real. Barnabas was commended for selling his field and laying the money at the apostles' feet. Ananias and Sapphira also sold a field, kept some money for themselves, and fell dead at the apostles' feet. Sounds pretty serious!

This Sunday begins five weeks of reading through 1 John. The letter begins with images of light and life from the prologue of John's gospel. Some listeners will hear familiar words from the liturgy: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us…." You might preach a series of five sermons on 1 John or help people come to a deeper understanding of liturgical language rooted in scripture.

Or, you might turn to Thomas even if you have preached on this text many times. There's a problem at the beginning: "the doors of the house…were locked for fear of the Jews." Remind listeners that everyone inside that room was Jewish! You might change the public reading to say "fear of the authorities." It's important to acknowledge that anti-Jewish animosity leaked back into John's gospel from a later time. This is important on these Sundays after Easter when there is no reading from the Old Testament (except for the Psalm). We don't want people to think we have given up the Old Testament after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus appears inside the locked room without knocking. His body has been transformed in some mysterious way, but still bears the wounds of crucifixion. It is the wounded Christ who says, "Peace be with you." Jesus had promised the disciples peace when he sat at table with them for the last time (14:27). He had also promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit (14:16–17, 25–26; 15:7–15).

9. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), 98.

Now Jesus was breathing that Spirit and that peace into them. Past promises are now present.

But where was Thomas? Why didn't he feel the need to be in hiding? No explanation is given but there is no reason to think that Thomas ran away. It was Thomas who said he was willing to die with Jesus (11:16). It was Thomas who asked Jesus to show him the way (14:5). Jesus meets Thomas at the point of his need: "Put your finger in the nail prints and place your hand in my side." It isn't clear if Thomas actually does this but he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus speaks words that aren't really for Thomas at all. Jesus is looking over Thomas' shoulder, looking at the preacher and the congregation, giving us a benediction: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Pastoral Reflections

If you have preached on Thomas too many times, you may decide to preach on Acts 4. What would it mean if our congregations were shaped by this communal sharing? As noted above, Luke isn't talking about the economy of a whole society and yet if Jesus' followers were shaped by this communal ethic they could be a catalyst for the common good beyond the church. How can people help one another with difficult economic decisions? "Household Economics" is an especially helpful chapter in the book *Practicing Our Faith,* edited by Dorothy Bass. Pentecost ends too soon if we don't connect the outpouring of the Spirit with the transformed life believers are called to share with one another.

John 20 offers an abundance of themes. Here are glimpses of a few—but you cannot choose them all:

- The connections between Spirit and breath/wind with many clues from earlier parts of John's gospel (e.g., Nicodemus in John 3, characteristics of the Spirit/Advocate in John 14 and 15).
- "Peace be with you"—how can we help people experience deeper meaning in passing the peace during worship? What word of peace do you long to hear?
- What does it mean to retain or forgive sins? Is this a word only for ordained pastors?
- The significance of Jesus' wounds: if we don't see the wounds, we won't see Jesus. Where do we see wounds in our own lives and in the larger world? This can be a very personal sermon or a more public consideration of the tragic wounds of racism in the United States.
- "Do not doubt, but believe"—Can there be faith without doubt? What does it mean to believe in spite of doubt?

People feel a special kinship with Thomas. A lifetime of preaching and listening cannot exhaust this friendship.

Barbara Lundblad

Third Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2015

Acts 3:12–19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1–7
Luke 24:36b–48

Engaging the Texts

The hallelujahs are quieting down, the trumpets are in their cases, and the flowers have been sent to homebound members—or are slowly wilting as the custodian (or pastor) tries to remember to water them. By this third Sunday of Easter much in the congregation seems to be returning to status quo. It is precisely in this time

that the texts for today add significant power. There is another shaking up of the people…turning and returning.

It may be helpful to remind people of Jesus' path to the cross which winds through the temple. It was in the temple that Jesus challenged the practices of the day. Jesus took vendors, religious leaders, and well-established practices to task. Jesus turned over the tables, turned people from the temple (driving them out), and turned several in authority against him. This week we re-turn to the temple with Peter and John. These two Jesus-following-Jewish-disciples are practicing their faith and engaging in religious ritual and worship. At the temple Peter and John encounter a man born lame who turns to them for alms. Peter announces that they have neither gold nor silver to give (an interesting note of not bringing money after Jesus drove money changers from the place); rather, Peter holds out the promise of life and healing in the name of Jesus the Nazarene (an announcement that likely made many uncomfortable). Then Peter grabs the man—"seizing" or "arresting" him in the Greek—and makes him stand.

In the wake of Easter what does it mean to take a "broken," longing, hurting person waiting at the Beautiful Gate of the Most High and to *turn* his gaze, arrest him (taking him by the arm), and make him stand? The juxtaposition is in contrast to Jesus who Peter says was condemned and died. This man is lifted up and given life—all in the promise of God made known in Jesus. Peter now uses this testimony to call all people to repent (be turned), to be seized by the promise made known through the prophets, through ancestors in faith, and now Jesus—and to be raised up (called to stand).

In the texts that follow we hear again and again of the turning and returning to God. The Psalm offers a deeply embodied turning to God in prayer and awareness that God is present and engaged. The Second Reading invites people to hear the promise of being lifted up as beloved children of God and turned and oriented to what this means for the future.

Finally, the Gospel is a powerful Easter story of journey, relationship, and promise. Very likely many of us have preached on the concepts of road/journey, conversation/testimony, communion/breaking of bread. Today, coupled with the other texts, there is an opportunity to reflect on turning to encounter the wounded Jesus in our midst and being turned to joy and proclamation.

Just as Peter and John return to the temple and live and witness to new life in Jesus; just as the epistle writer turns people in orientation to living as beloved children of God; just as the Gospel lesson—after two disciples returned from Emmaus—portrays the disciples being reoriented from fear to promise, there is a wide sense of new life in turning to the Holy.

What does it mean for people who are returning to church this third Sunday of Easter to hear and proclaim the life and promise of Jesus? How are they seized and changed at the beautiful sanctuary doors? How is God embodied for them in story and breaking of the bread? The Easter story continues to turn and reorient us in our living and being. We are now gifted in our re-turning to tell the story (to witness and proclaim) to others.

Pastoral Reflections

Prior to my tenure at Calvary Lutheran in Minneapolis, the congregation remodeled the worship space. The communion table came down to the main floor and

the community created a space for part of the congregation to be seated in a circle or semi-circle. There is a gift in finding ways to restructure the worship space and to invite people to hear the texts while looking at one another. This is an opportunity to really look at who has shown up and reflect on how God is telling a story of turning their gaze, seizing their arms, and lifting them up in new life.

Today may also be an opportunity to teach people how to give their own testimony. When we hear the words of Peter or experience the disciples being lifted up as witnesses, how are we equipped to share this story? How do we talk about the ways that God has oriented us? How we have been turned or re-turned to God?

During the Easter season with broken bread at Emmaus and Jesus sharing a meal of fish on the beach, it can be powerful to do a "communion procession." Many of us have experienced a Gospel procession, but what does it mean to take the bread and cup out into the middle of the congregation and say the words of institution in the midst of the assembly? This offers another way to see new life for the lame, the hurting, the longing. It offers a deep and abiding promise of Jesus being seen today in our very presence as the meal is shared. It invites us to return to the places from which we have come and to be witnesses of the en-fleshed life and promise of God.

The urban congregation I serve values hearing and seeing the word challenge and change them. They long to see how the word is calling them to deeper authentic relationship. Today's lessons accomplish both. Our hearts and minds, our journeys and stories, are turned again to God who seizes us from the life that has been and lifts us high—through the cross—to walk and live again.

Brad Froslee

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2015

Acts 4:5–12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16–24
John 10:11–18

Engaging the Texts

Wrapped in the texts for this week are words of restoration and healing. In the first reading we encounter Peter "filled by the Holy Spirit" giving testimony about a man who is now in good health on account of the name of Jesus the Nazarene. Through Jesus new life is made known.

The Second Lesson calls the followers of Jesus to live God's love and to lay down their lives for others; to give of their abundance (the goods of the world) for the sake of their brothers and sisters in need. The lesson calls the community into the on-going witness of restoration.

The Gospel frames restoration in the life and laying down of life by the good shepherd. This language speaks to the agrarian context and familiar image of shepherd; it hearkens back to images of David (of the keepers of God's people).

In this season of Easter, the concepts of healing and restoration are powerful. Invite the community to reflect on what it means to hear of one who gives his very life to heal and restore the world and her people. What does it mean to understand God's abundance and restoration being poured out? How are we engaged in the on-going work of God's love and healing?

The texts provide wonderful reflection on the power of God that is embodied by Jesus. There is opportunity to celebrate God's Spirit dwelling or coming to life in the people.

The preacher may want to lift up testimony (Peter), God's enduring promise (Psalm), Jesus' love for the people and

through the people (1 John), the witness of the shepherd—tied to care of community and expanding promise (John). Framing all of these is the salvific vision and action of God. The witness of Jesus now emboldens us to live and proclaim the restoration of life, relationship, and care for others.

Pastoral Reflections

Growing up on a farm and raising sheep with 4-H, I love the ability to connect with Jesus as the shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. As a teenager I made treks to our sheep barn every one to four hours during the night in the midst of lambing season. I also recall stories of my grandfather who spent time in the 1920s helping with sheep in the hills and mountains of the Dakotas and Wyoming—watching out for coyotes, mindful of cold weather, alert to dangers in the terrain.

The reality, however, is that the vast majority of people in church are far removed from the reality of shepherds (other than perhaps a romanticized version), and most are removed from agricultural life. How can we take the richness and power of these passages and bring them to bear on life in most of our congregations today?

Some ideas that come to mind:

In our congregation there are a number of women (many now in their 60s–90s) who might be described as neighborhood moms. Many of these women were stay-at-home moms who cared for their own children and were the safe place for kids in the area. They monitored the neighborhood for dangers, they put Band-Aids on numerous "boo-boos," they put dinner on the table always expecting that they may have two to twenty more show up, they raced around town to schools and doctors' offices—and occasionally the police station. My guess is that as we hear the story of the good shepherd this may be an image that resounds for a number of adults in our congregation who either were that person or were cared for by that person. Many will be able to name how this person showed love or faith to them—people who gave of their life for others.

It is also important to explore other vocations akin to shepherd/care giver. Is there a school custodian who greets all of the kids by name as they come to school, who cleans up after them, who makes sure kids, teachers, and staff have everything they need? Is there a city bus driver who knows the people at each stop, who asks them about their day, who waits an extra minute to make sure someone isn't missed at their regular stop? Is there a beautician or nurses' aide in the area hospital or nursing home who goes out of the way to relate to the people who are there, to ask about their hurts and pains, who gets to know people's families and gives people that extra effort?

The shepherds today may look very different from the shepherds of 2,000 years ago. Yet, there is a deep relationship, a care for the other, a willingness to give of oneself. There is a richness in thinking how people today live out their lives and reveal love, healing, and promise.

Grounded in the promise of Jesus' restoring individuals, community, and the cosmos, the on-going witness is one of following in his ways. There is an image Luther uses of each person being a "little christ." Today we might invite each person to be a "little shepherd." In experiencing the one who lays down all he has (ego, clothing, family—even last breath) for the sake of others, how are the followers of the Good Shepherd now invited to give of themselves for the sake of others and the world? No matter age,

gender, race, sexuality, class, status—or even vocation—the call of the shepherd who lays down his life now lays claim to our living, dying, and very being. If your community is one that provides opportunities for healing services or testimony during worship, this is a day that naturally opens up these possibilities.

Brad Froslee

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2015

Acts 8:26–40
Psalm 22:25–31
1 John 4:7–21
John 15:1–8

Engaging the Texts

This is a day to consider making a change in the appointed readings. Throughout the Easter season the First Reading is always from Acts, with no reading from the Old Testament except for the Psalm. While there are good reasons to hear Acts after Easter, there is a sense of loss in not hearing readings from the Old Testament—as though those texts no longer matter after Jesus rose from the dead. On this Sunday it is especially meaningful to hear Isaiah 56 alongside Acts 8; thus, the readings for this Sunday would be as follows:

First Reading	Isaiah 56:1–8
Second Reading	Acts 8:26–40

Psalm and Gospel readings would remain as appointed.

Isaiah 56 speaks of two groups of people who have been excluded from God's chosen people: foreigners and eunuchs. This was a surprising promise to exiles returning from Babylon. How will they maintain their unique relationship with God? Surely not by mingling with foreigners who do not share their religion! Surely not by welcoming eunuchs who will have no children to pass on the faith! But God's promise comes precisely to these two groups. The promise to eunuchs is particularly striking: "I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters" (Isa 56:5). What an unexpected promise to those who would never have children to carry on their names! The Hebrew for a monument and a name is *yad vashem,* the name of the holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Those who perished will be remembered even if they died childless with no one to recall their names.

Isaiah 56 is the framework for the story in Acts. Luke is especially fond of Isaiah 40–66. Here in Acts 8 Isaiah's promise to foreigners and eunuchs is embodied in one person—an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip and the eunuch rode along together as Philip interpreted words from Isaiah 53 about the one who was like a sheep led to slaughter, humiliated and denied justice. Perhaps they kept unrolling the scroll until they came to chapter 56. Imagine the Ethiopian eunuch's joy as he heard God's wonderful promise especially for him.

What about the gospel? There's plenty of good news in both Isaiah and Acts. John 15 is also good news—even with images of judgment for those who fail to bear fruit. In one of his many "I am" statements in John, Jesus chooses the image of vine and branches to show the close relationship between himself and his disciples. We hear this text after Easter but Jesus was speaking at the Passover table, his last meal with the disciples before he was crucified. Over and over Jesus emphasizes the word "abide," a very important word since he would soon be leaving them.

Pastoral Reflections

I encourage preachers to focus on Acts 8 alongside Isaiah 56. Both texts heard on the same day are rich with possibilities for preaching. The sermon can point to the many surprises in the Acts story. At the beginning the narrator tells us this is "a wilderness road" (literally "a desert road," *erene*). Tuck that away for later. We don't talk much about eunuchs and if we do, we are probably embarrassed. Some people are born eunuchs, others are castrated (as the *castrati* boy sopranos castrated to keep their high voices). We don't know about this eunuch's past, but we do know about his present. He is a very powerful person, in charge of the queen's treasury, well-educated, reading from his own scroll in his own chariot. He has gone to Jerusalem to worship. Was he allowed in the assembly of the Lord (see Deut 5:23)? Had he been humiliated like the person in Isaiah? For many years churches have excluded and humiliated people seen as sexually different. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people may have gained respect in many professions, but Christian churches still named them unfit to serve in the assembly of the Lord. We don't have to claim that the Ethiopian eunuch was gay or transgender to see that he would have been considered sexually "other." How can we say to those who have been excluded: You have been given a place within God's house, a monument and a name?

Another surprise in this story is how Philip answers the eunuch's question, "About whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Starting with the Isaiah text, Philip "proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." But Jesus was not in the text! We believe that the Spirit anointed Philip and Luke the evangelist to "see" Jesus in Isaiah even though Jesus' name isn't there. Philip was interpreting the Isaiah text—not because the Ethiopian eunuch couldn't read, but because he didn't yet understand the fullness of the story. Without a witness *beyond* the text, Philip could not have seen Jesus in the text. We can help people who worry that we have given up the Bible when we help them see that the words written down invite us to see more than the words written down! The final surprise comes when the eunuch shouts, "Look, here is water!" Remember: this is a desert road—there shouldn't be any water! Then he asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Some might shout "Everything!" You're a foreigner. You're a sexual misfit. You haven't been to catechism class. But here is water. Sometimes God makes a river where there hasn't been one before.

Barbara Lundblad

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2015

Acts 10:44–48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1–6
John 15:9–17

Engaging the Texts

Krister Stendahl once told a group of Lutheran pastors in New York City, "Don't preach on love if it's not in the text." Well, this Sunday, love *is* in the texts! Love is explicit in John's gospel as well as 1 John. It's not hard to hear a call to love extravagantly in Acts 10 even though "love" is not in the text. That story at the end of Acts 10 will be more fully understood when set within the whole chapter. Last Sunday we heard the story of the Ethiopian eunuch baptized on a desert road. Today the story focuses on someone

very different from the Ethiopian eunuch. Cornelius is not a foreigner, but leader of a regiment of 100 Roman soldiers. He is an insider in the culture even as the Ethiopian eunuch was an outsider. He is a Gentile who is respected by the Jewish community. Most of Acts 10 describes Peter's strange dream in which a sheet comes down from heaven bearing all sorts of animals, many of them considered unclean. "I've never eaten anything that is profane!" Peter protests. Later he comes to see that the dream was about far more than food: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (10:34). After Peter's little sermon something shocking happens: the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius' household—even though they weren't circumcised or baptized. Connecting this story to the other readings, Peter and those who came with him were being called to more expansive acts of love.

In the second reading from the last chapter of 1 John, love and obedience are intertwined. How do we love God? By keeping the commandments. This makes love more than a squishy feeling and gives love content that is shaped by God's justice. As Cornel West often says, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

John 15 emphasizes this same connection between love and commandment. So what is the commandment? The commandment is to love one another! It often happens in the book of John that we feel like we're going in circles, getting a bit dizzy. Jesus repeats the command to love one another so often that we get the sense he really means it! This chapter is part of Jesus' "farewell discourse" to his disciples—like a professor being asked: What would you say if you knew this were your last lecture? Perhaps by the time John was writing this gospel, love for one another had become more difficult.

Pastoral Reflections

I remember a *Peanuts* cartoon I saw years ago. Lucy proclaims in exasperation: "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand!" How do we preach on a word as slippery as "love"? I love my dog. I love ice cream. I love my parents. I love music. I love God. Knowing that there are three different Greek words for "love" may not be very helpful. The same Greek word is used in this text for God's love for Jesus, Jesus' love for the disciples and Jesus' command to love one another—all forms of *agape.*

This command to love one another came before Jesus began his last lecture. He had just washed the disciples' feet when he said: "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). Did Jesus mean *since* I have loved you or *because* I have loved you? What if Jesus meant *in the way* that I have loved you, you also should love one another?

What does Jesus' love look like in John's gospel? In John 4, Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman at the well. She's a different gender, different ethnic group, different religious tradition. This is *a reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love*. Four chapters later, Jesus bends down to be with a woman accused of adultery. Her accusers have the written law on their side, but Jesus does not condemn her. This is *a people-before-rules kind of love*. In chapter 9 Jesus heals a man born blind and refuses to accept the conventional wisdom that this man or his parents must have sinned. This is *a love that challenges accepted norms*. We can't stop at every chapter, but there are many clues along the way that show us how Jesus loved. At the Passover meal, just before Jesus' love command, we see *a bending-down kind of love*. At the end of his life, Jesus looked down from the cross

and saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her. "Woman, here is your son," Jesus said. And to his disciple, "Here is your mother." This is *a family-creating kind of love* where water is thicker than blood.

When love is shaped by God's commandments this love can't be whatever we make up. How do we reach across boundaries to love people whose race is different from our own? How is that love shaped by God's call for justice? Sometimes John's gospel can seem other-worldly, but this is the gospel that shocked the philosophers: "And the Word (*logos*) became flesh and lived among us…" (1:14a). How can loving one another take on flesh? It's not optional: Jesus commanded us to love.

Barbara Lundblad

Ascension Day
May 14, 2015

Acts 1:1–11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15–23
Luke 24:44–53

Engaging the Texts

Ascension Day always falls on the fortieth day of Easter. The timing is based on Acts 1:3 which tells us that the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples "during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Congregations that do not have Ascension Day services often move the commemoration to the following Sunday. Whether Thursday or Sunday, the Acts account is too important to miss. The disciples' question is urgent: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" The question indicates that the disciples are still confused about Jesus' mission. Throughout his life, Jesus kept saying, "The kingdom of God has come near"—and it was quite clear Jesus didn't mean a nation-state. After telling the disciples they cannot know the time, we hear one of the biggest little words in scripture: "But." That word usually marks an important shift, an alternative way of thinking. Here, that little word changes the focus from speculative time to present-tense time. The focus also shifts away from Jesus to the disciples: "But *you* will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon *you*; and *you* will be my witnesses" (italics added). Don't spend your time trying to discern God's mind; rather, believe that you are called to carry on the ministry of Jesus, empowered by the same Holy Spirit that anointed him back in Luke 4.

The Gospel reading from Luke 24 also tells the ascension story with a slightly different emphasis. In this ending to the resurrection story, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." He had done the same thing as he walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Would they have recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread if they hadn't heard him open the scriptures? Part of the disciples' call is to continue this work, opening the scriptures. That call has been passed down through a long chain of disciples to you and me.

Pastoral Reflections

Here's a silly question: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Wouldn't YOU stand looking up toward heaven if you had seen Jesus rising up? There was another time when two men in dazzling clothes appeared to the women at the empty tomb. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they asked the women. Their question must have seemed absurd for the women had *not* come looking for the living, but to pay respects to the dead.

Jesus doesn't seem to be where he's supposed to be. He was not in the tomb, but risen and gone to Galilee. In today's story, Jesus was no longer on earth, but risen beyond human sight. We might begin to believe that to be with Jesus means to be somewhere other than where we are now. We, too, are left wondering.

There's a wonderful woodcut of Jesus' ascension by Albrecht Durer. If you look closely at the picture—not up in the clouds, but on the ground—you can see footprints on the earth. Durer has carefully outlined Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. Perhaps the artist was simply imagining a detail that isn't in the text. Or perhaps, he is asking us the question, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" The witness we have received is not "What goes up must come down." Rather it is this: "The one who went up is still around." Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a deep sense of Christ's footprints on the earth. "The body of Christ takes up space on the earth," he wrote in *Cost of Discipleship.* That is, we do not have to leave this earth to be with Christ, but Christ continues to be present to us in the power of the Spirit. Bonhoeffer goes on, "A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities...that is all. But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him." The body of Christ takes up space on the earth.

The Ephesians text says it boldly: "And [God]…has made [Christ] the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Sometimes, it's still easier to keep looking up there or out there or somewhere other than where we are—especially if we think of the church as the body of Christ. We see so many blemishes, so many things wrong. Perhaps you have friends who say, "Show me a church where ministers aren't self-serving, where people aren't hypocritical, where love is genuine, and I'll join that church." Maybe you have said that yourself. We will have to wait a long time for this perfect church. Such a church takes up no space on this earth.

At the end of this Ascension Day service, invite people to look at each other—across the aisle, behind and in front. Ask people to keep their eyes open as you pray the prayer from Ephesians: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

Go in peace. Jesus is here with us. *Thanks be to God!*

Barbara Lundblad

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2015

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9–13
John 17:6–19

Engaging the Texts

If you are marking today as Ascension Sunday, see previous comments on those texts. If you held Ascension Day services on Thursday, the focus today will be texts for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The first reading from Acts takes up the story after Jesus' ascension. In Luke's understanding, the disciples represent a restored and renewed Israel; thus, it is critical that there be twelve disciples corresponding to the twelve tribes. Judas must be replaced and his replacement must be someone who has accompanied the disciples from Jesus' baptism until his ascension. How that is possible is a mystery because

the disciples were not called until *after* Jesus' baptism. The two who qualify are not known anywhere beyond this text: Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus, and Matthias. It may seem a rather arbitrary process to make the choice by casting lots, but there are many references to casting lots to make decisions in the Old Testament. Jonah 1:7–8 is probably the most familiar. The lot fell to Matthias and the circle of twelve was now complete, awaiting the promised gift of the Holy Spirit that follows immediately in Acts 2.

Today completes the readings from 1 John that began the Sunday after Easter. Themes in this portion reflect the theology of John's gospel: "If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son." With that reading in our ears we turn to the gospel.

John 17 is often called Jesus' high priestly prayer. This prayer concludes a lengthy time around the Passover table that began with Jesus washing the disciples' feet. That image of Jesus bending down needs to be remembered as we listen to Jesus' prayer in which he seems to be very exalted.

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." While Jesus is praying to his Father, this is a very motherly, tender prayer. Jesus' prayer isn't only in the past. The verse that follows today's reading goes on: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who come to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one..." Jesus is praying also for us. We are over-hearing a great pastoral prayer. Each section ends with a silent "Lord, in your mercy" and the whole church responds, "Hear our prayer."

Pastoral Reflections

That they may be one—this is Jesus' prayer for the twelve disciples and for all who come to believe through their word. Then shouldn't we get rid of denominations? Some church growth workshops recommend deleting denominational names all together. I understand the reasoning: if you grew up as a Methodist you might never walk in the door of a church called "Lutheran." And if you've never been inside a church, you have no idea what "Lutheran" is. Get rid of those denominations—let's all be the one Christian family Jesus prayed for.

Well, there's a problem. Jesus prayed that they might all be one, not the same. Jesus didn't even pray that they would all agree. Denominations can be seen as signs of human brokenness, but denominations can also be gifts—if we remember that our oneness is in Jesus Christ. Denominational names are adjectives rather than nouns. There are Lutheran Christians and Roman Catholic Christians, Presbyterian Christians and AME Zion Christians and many more (even though we use shorthand and turn the adjectives into nouns!)

Non-denominational churches may be appealing, but they can also be deceptive. It is surely possible to be prideful in saying, "I'm a Lutheran." I once wore a little charm on my watch with the Luther rose on one side and "I am a Lutheran" on the reverse. Perhaps this was, in case of an accident, someone would call a Lutheran pastor! It is also possible to be prideful about having no denominational name. "Our church in non-denominational," a woman told me some years ago when she stopped in to invite me to a neighborhood Bible study. She gave me a little book titled *Christianity Can Be Profitable*. It was about making money and it was written by her minister. Technically, she was right: her church was "non-denominational." But we could also say it was a very small denomination defined by one minister

and those who followed his teachings.

Denominations can be seen as gifts and reminders of the larger, global family that is Christ's Church. When I say I'm a Lutheran Christian I am mindful that there are others with different adjectives who name the name of Jesus. It is possible to worship in a thousand different tongues and rhythms, to raise our arms in ecstatic praise or sit quietly barely moving an eyebrow. It is all right to drink wine or grape juice from a common cup or a little glass. It is all right to use a green hymnal or a red one or none at all! Our oneness is not in these human constructions or constitutions, not in popes or councils. When we forget the source of our oneness, Jesus is still praying for us.

Barbara Lundblad

The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation

The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation offers a number of stewardship workshops each year, each covering broad-based stewardship material. These events are open to the public. Please consider joining us and inviting members of your congregation to participate!

Programs offered through the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation at LSTC promote the practice of proportionate giving, encouraging greater spiritual growth in the sharing of all our talents and gifts.
The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation generously underwrites the workshops. For information about the foundation and upcoming events, go to tithing.lstc.edu, email tithing@lstc.edu or call 773-256-0679.

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