

FORUM LETTER

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The most boring people in the world



“What attracts men to evil acts is not the evil in them but the good that is there, seen under a false aspect and with a distorted perspective. The good seen from that angle is only the bait in a trap. When you reach out to take it, the trap is sprung and you are left with disgust, boredom — and hatred. Sinners are people who hate everything, because their world is necessarily full of betrayal, full of illusion, full of deception. And the greatest sinners are the most boring people in the world because they are also the most bored and the ones who find life most tedious.” — *by Thomas Merton in New Seeds of Contemplation (New Directions, 1961)*

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Vignettes for summer



I jot these things down as they happen, small vignettes remembered in the course of being a parish pastor, and in the course of other things. They reside in my memory, and I think fondly of the occasions and persons that prompted them. If you don't mind, I'll share some of them with you here. It's summer, right? Maybe you could do with some relaxed reading this issue. Plenty of time to get serious, later, about lots of other serious things. If you get a smile or two in the moment, so much the better. These things happened, reported here mostly without elaboration, but, of course, the names have been changed.

■ So, I go looking for the second point of my first-call two-point parish out in rural Nebraska. After a lot of confusion and wrong turns along gravel roads, I find the small white frame building and see a fellow in the church cemetery watering flowers at several graves. Aside from the call committee itself and the men who showed up to help unpack the truck, he was maybe only the third parishioner I had met to that point. The parish had been vacant a year and a little better and things were tense around there, and for good reason. They had dismissed my predecessor by formally rescinding his call on a 3/4's vote at a joint congregational meeting with the district bishop in the chair presiding. Everybody was mad at everybody. They were mad at the pastor for not taking a hint and resigning, mad at the bishop (mostly for his neutrality, I guess), mad at circumstances that brought it all about. And every pastor I knew who knew the parish had said, don't take the call. Fresh from seminary, I wasn't in a position to be picky, so when they offered, I accepted. I'm supposed to preach the next Sunday and I am, well, frightened, in a word.

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If they don't like the sermon, will they throw hymnals? How friendly are these people? I should meet this guy and find out. I go over and introduce myself. He takes me off on a long, rambling, somewhat melancholic tour of the cemetery, pointing out the graves of his grandparents, his parents, this deceased member, that next one, and on. As we walk, it occurs to me I've met more dead parishioners than live ones in the first week of my pastorate. Finally, he pauses in front of a headstone from the late 1890's. He looks at me slyly, shakes his head sadly, sighs. "A former pastor is buried here. Too bad he didn't work out."

■ Dorothy and Harold. Listening to them, well, mostly listening to Dorothy, I formed an opinion that Harold was the kind of husband who never did anything quite right. Both of them were sweet people, though, quite elderly, but Dorothy was given to episodic bouts with ditziness in some of the things she would say. Well, Harold fell ill and knew he was dying, but he was determined, he told Dorothy and me, to live at least until their 55th wedding anniversary. He died in the week after. I mentioned to Dorothy, "Harold did what he said he would do, lived to your anniversary." She emitted a soft but abrupt snort. "My birthday's next month."

■ Dorothy, once more. Harold's closest nephew fancied himself a singer and wanted to sing at his uncle's funeral. But even for the happiest events, he had only a marginal voice. I could only guess how'd he'd be at the funeral of his beloved uncle. Nonetheless, Dorothy thought it would be nice. Truth is, I don't believe she knew how to tell him no. The nephew starts out in a little reedy voice that might have been a tenor and midway into the first verse he breaks down and starts sobbing. He stops, composes himself, signals the organist, and gives it another try. Same result. A third try and he finally gives up, chokes an apology and sits down. At the funeral dinner, Dorothy tells me how much the service meant to her, except, she points out, for that nephew. "I'm so glad Harold wasn't here to hear that."

■ Mrs. Andersen was the poorest old woman I ever met, living on a broken down farm with an

alcoholic son in his mid-60s. Old rusted out farm implements and junk dotted the farm yard, randomly abandoned to where they had last been left. I think they rented out their land and lived on that and Social Security. Her husband had been invalided in World War I, never really recovering from his wounds and had died years and years before I met her. I was told her farm, such as it was, had been saved from foreclosure by a penny auction in 1933. Still, considering everything, she kept to an impossibly cheery disposition. I asked her how. "Life comes hard," she said simply, "but I've always known Jesus."

■ Instead of milk, Mrs. Andersen was in the habit of putting a bit of vanilla ice cream in her coffee. This was a luxury she allowed herself, but she said only for special occasions. What's a special occasion? "Oh," she thought it over. "Whenever you have coffee, I suppose."

■ The congregation I was serving had a small cluster of scratchy cats who dedicated themselves to making life hard for every pastor. They gossiped, conspired, complained in writing to the bishop, all the usual things. They had done all that and worse with previous pastors. I ducked my head, did not respond, and tended my call. But word of what they were doing got out; it always does. At the height of the tension, folks unexpectedly started dropping by the parsonage with gifts, little gifts, really. Fresh vegetables, pies, rolls, almost always something we could eat. It had not happened before the conflict began, and when the conflict subsided, so, regrettably, did the treats. But while the food was arriving, it was an immensely bolstering experience. There was one fellow in this I remember so well. He was shy, an authentic "aw-shucks" sort, genuinely socially undeveloped. It was painful trying to talk to him sometimes. He had never married, drove a 30-year-old pick-up inherited from his father, raised a few cows and cut a little hay, and looked after his widowed aunt. He was also a consummate woodworker. He could "talk" to wood, as he put it, rather elegantly as I now think about it. He too brought a gift, a magnificent walnut jewelry box he had made especially for my wife. I've never seen one like it, before or since. But he couldn't give it to her, not

directly; wouldn't be proper. Besides, he couldn't talk to girls very well, so he handed it to me and told me to give it to her. "Made something for you, too," and he handed me a turkey caller.

■ This is something I said, but I'll set the stage. I'll call them Harry and Hannah, both widowed for many years, both in their early 80's. They had known each other since they were children. Neither of them could remember a time when they had not known each other. Through all the years they were married to their respective spouses and in the many years of their widowhood, Harry always sat to one side of the church, Hannah to the other. Until one Sunday when Harry came in and — to the astonishment of just everyone — sat down next to Hannah. What's more, Hannah gave every indication of expecting him. Thereafter, people would remark on how frequently Harry's car came to be seen out in front of Hannah's house at night. And, equally, how frequently it seemed to be there the next morning. (What the gossips missed was Harry going home late at night and returning the next morning for coffee.) After this went on for a few weeks, one of the parish fussies pointedly asked me, "Do you think he's 'staying overnight,' Pastor?"

It was one of the most surprising questions I've ever been asked. The shock probably explains why I didn't measure my words very carefully, blurting the first thing that came to mind. "Good God! They're both in their 80's. Don't you hope so?"

This I learned went around and was reported favorably at the local tavern. It was a nice wedding, by the way, though Harry and Hannah did decline to take the pre-marital inventory assessment I typically administer to couples before marriage.

■ Back to my first call. The country half of my "town (population 302) and country" parish held their worship at 9 a.m. I had to leave the parsonage by eight (earlier on snow days, and there were plenty of those in Nebraska) and zip over seven miles of loose gravel road to get to the country church in time to settle myself in for worship. No matter how early I got there, seven times out of ten, I bet, Arthur was there ahead of me and

everyone else. Arthur was 79 when I met him. He broke his leg at age 82 while re-roofing his barn; slipped off the ladder. It didn't slow him down much that I ever noticed, except I did get to church earlier than he did for a while. But prior to that, there he was, waiting for me in the church parking lot most Sunday mornings. Worse, Arthur dozed through every sermon I ever preached. Come offering, he roused himself to drop one dollar in the collection plate, one big dollar, and after worship on the way out he always said, "Nice sermon, Pastor." Like he'd know, huh? Come harvest, though, he slipped \$2,000 to the church. I finally did find out how he beat me to church; one of the church ladies filled me in. Arthur lived way north of the church and most Saturday nights he'd drive way down south of the church to the VFW hall for the weekly social. He'd stay there until closing and, rather than drive all the way up north back to his farm, he'd stop at the church parking lot for a little snooze before snoozing through my sermon. I also figured out, when he said "nice sermon," he was really saying, "I like you."

■ The congregation had a tradition of singing *Happy Birthday* for anyone whose birthday fell on a Sunday. Ralph had turned 90 on Wednesday, but I told everyone we'd make an exception and sing it anyway. He'd be 93 or more before his birthday ever again fell on a Sunday. I was thinking, we'd better get it in while we could. We did and he was appreciative. I asked him how 90 felt. "It'd feel a lot better if it felt like 50."

■ Edgar was 94, possessed of an ironic humor, and lived next door to a young, athletic woman. "I don't understand. My yard is exactly the same size as hers and it takes her 40 minutes to cut her grass, and it takes me two hours."

■ I dropped by to see Edgar on his 95th birthday. What's it like," I asked, "being 95?" "Can't say; first time it's ever happened to me."

■ Christ Lutheran Church was one of the designated "safe places" in the event of a school evacuation. Somebody started phoning in bomb threats to a line of schools that eventually reached down to our school district. The church quickly

filled with elementary kids. Their teachers had them send thank-you notes afterwards. Wrote a fourth-grade boy, "Thank you for the safe place. You are the best Christ I know."

■ I was diagnosed with diabetes in March 1995 and the doctor handed me a ridiculous diet, limited to 1,100 calories daily. Our June Vacation Bible School cranked to life and, with all the cookies and such flowing into the church during VBS, I was having an especially hard time staying with the diet, so-called. Like Mae West said, "Lead me not into temptation; I can find it on my own." I bolted down three brownies in rapid succession. Within minutes my wife was over at the church, in my face, demanding to know exactly how many toes I'd like amputated due to diabetic complications if I didn't stick to the diet. How'd *she* find out? I was more worried about that than my toes. The VBS director saw me eat the brownies and promptly phoned my wife to rat me out.

■ *Forum Letter* has a 60-something subscriber way, way, like way out in St. Francis, KS. (Look it up; dare you to find it on the map.) He drops into Kansas City now and again and we usually find time for lunch. He showed me a snapshot from Thanksgiving Day, a happy family scene filled with smiling people — except for his 90-something father on the end, decked out in bibs and looking mad as hell. "Why is your dad so upset?" "Oh, he got put-out 'cause we called him in off the combine for the picture."

■ Margaret was dying. Thinking to bring some solace I said to her, "Remember, Jesus knows you. Whatever you face, he's with you." Her eyes snapped open and she looked at me as a flash of real irritation crossed her face. She fairly snapped

at me, "I already know that." Then she softened, patted my hand, and said, "But thank you for saying it, anyway."

■ Social biologists tell us that we human beings are the most cooperative species on the planet. We will do things for each other without any possible chance of reciprocity and, often, without any expectation of even a thank you. We open doors for each other, wave other drivers ahead of us, shower charities with money, and we will go way out of our way for a complete stranger we've never met and will never meet again. My cell phone slipped off my belt in a New York taxi one night. I got back to my room and phoned my wife to tell her, but she already knew. The next rider in the cab had found it, found our home number in the cell's phone book, phoned my wife and left his number with her so she could give it to me. I scratched it down on a paper scrap and contacted him. We couldn't meet that night, so we checked our proximate locations for the next day. I'd be passing near the Harvard Club. Close enough, he said. He'd leave it with the desk clerk and I could pick it up there. I have no real way of knowing if it was convenient or not for him to drop it off. I do know it was very convenient for me. Next morning, there it was waiting for me with the desk clerk, tucked inside a padded envelope with an unsigned note on the outside, "A man from Missouri will pick this up." That was when I realized we had not exchanged names. The clerk had never met him and didn't know who he was. I had lost his phone number and my wife hadn't kept it, so I've never had any way to thank him. But I say a prayer for him now and again, and, out of consideration for other people like him, I've never lost another cell phone. — *by the editor*

The sloth of sin



Some years ago the *National Enquirer* had a contest for the King of Spud. They were searching, they said, for the biggest coach potato in the United States. The winner was a 35-year-old bachelor in Fridley, MN who kept three televisions on while he was home,

and had another constantly going in his office at work. "All I do is watch television and work," he admitted. "There's nothing I like more than sitting around with a six-pack of beer, some chips, and a remote control."

I'm pretty sure I had this guy in confirma-

tion one year. He could be a poster child for what the Christian tradition has called sloth. Today we'd call him lazy, and see it as a character flaw, or maybe, if it becomes bad enough, a psychological problem. But is it a sin? And if so, why?

Sloth is unique among the famous seven deadly sins in that it is only the Judeo-Christian tradition that seems to be concerned about it. The ancient Greek and Roman philosophers generally agreed that pride, lust, gluttony, anger, envy, and greed were morally wrong. But they didn't say a word about sloth. The Hebrews and the Christians, however, saw it as a grievous sin.

The dictionary defines sloth as "laziness," and even the newer Bible translations tend to use that word — "lazy" rather than "slothful." The trouble with that definition or that translation is that it really confuses things, in a couple of ways.

First of all, sometimes what looks like laziness is actually quite a good thing. There's nothing wrong with lying on the grass beside a stream on a beautiful spring day and letting your mind disengage from the cares of the world. Indeed, if we've made any spiritual advance in modern life, it may be our appreciation of the importance of leisure. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," we used to say — and today we understand this is true of Jack and Jill and all boys and girls and men and women. We need to have time to play — time, we might even say, to be lazy.

But there's something else wrong with equating sloth with laziness: often it is the people who are the most busy who struggle most intensely with sloth. They are people who fill their lives with one thing and another, always working, or always exercising, or always volunteering — as if the moment they stop doing things, everything will fall apart. I've known pastors like that. I've not infrequently been a pastor like that. Such folks are far from lazy, but underneath all the activity, sloth often is lounging around.

We could use the word "lazy," though, if we understand sloth to be not so much a physical laziness as a laziness of the spirit. Sloth means not really caring much about anything. Dorothy Sayers puts it this way:

It is the sin that believes in nothing,

cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.

In other words, to be slothful is to turn so completely in on yourself as to take no notice of anything or anyone else.

A Simon & Garfunkle definition

Of course all of the seven deadly sins have a strong element of selfishness about them; but with most of them, there is at least some interaction with the world. The lustful person is engaged in some kind of relationship, as distorted and destructive as it may be. But with sloth, there is no outside world. It is all me. It is the reality expressed eloquently a generation ago by the Simon & Garfunkle song, *I Am a Rock*:

Hiding in my room,
safe within my womb,
I touch no one
and no one touches me.
I am a Rock.
I am an Island.

With sloth, you see, you don't want, you don't seek, you don't need to be in relationship with anyone or anything. You just exist, with no sense of purpose.

Stuck in sloth

I'm convinced that sloth is one of the premier sins of our time. Walk into any bookstore and check out the section on self-motivation. We're so consumed with sloth, you see, that we are desperately seeking some advice for how to get out of it, how to get ourselves moving. It doesn't matter if the subject is exercise, or financial planning, or relationships, or spiritual life — we feel stuck. We feel that we can't move. And that's sloth.

Or think of it another way. One of the biggest psychological maladies in our day is depression. Well, clinical depression is a terrible thing, often a serious medical problem, and I certainly don't mean to deny the importance of getting help with it. But we might say that, just as

an eating disorder might be related to gluttony, depression is related to sloth. When we are depressed, we are unable to move — in a figurative, and sometimes a literal, sense. For the depressed person, nothing matters. Symptoms of severe depression include things like a sudden disregard for personal hygiene, or the cleanliness of one's surroundings; or a sudden disinterest in relationships. These are also characteristics of sloth. The slothful person just doesn't care about anything. He or she is, as the Psalmist puts it, "as useless as a broken pot."

Of course most of us don't get to the extreme of needing psychological help for depression. Yet most of us also are troubled by sloth. As a specifically spiritual problem, sloth means not wanting to make the effort to live as God asks us to live. It means, at its nadir, not caring about God.

Psalm 42 is another good example of this. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" The psalmist recognizes that his soul is heavy. In modern language, he might say something like, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I get a grip on my life? Why am I feeling this way?" He also understands that the root of his problem is that he feels separated from God.

And that, you see, is why Christians regard sloth as a sin.

Godly indifference

To be slothful, unengaged in life, is to be unmindful of God. It is to be indifferent to God. Christianity teaches that God has given each one of us a vocation, a calling. We have a purpose in life. When we become so turned in on ourselves that we can no longer fulfill or even recognize that purpose, then we have become alienated from God and from others, and indeed, from ourselves.

"I passed by the field of the one who was lazy [again, that word really is "slothful"], by the

vineyard of a stupid person," says the writer of Proverbs, "and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down."

He's not really talking about horticultural matters here, but things of the spirit. The person who ignores God, who refuses to live in relationship with God, quickly finds his spirit overgrown with thorns. It doesn't take long for that to happen: "a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber."

Sluggish hope

The writer to the Hebrews strikes the same theme, but less obliquely. "We want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish" — again the word is really "slothful." The Christian life is one of diligence; when we will not work at it, we quickly stop growing in faith and hope.

Frederick Beuchner describes the slothful man as one who "goes through the motions, who flies on automatic pilot. Like a man with a bad head cold, he has mostly lost his sense of taste and smell. He knows something's wrong with him, but not wrong enough to do anything about it. Other people come and go, but through glazed eyes he hardly notices them. He is letting things run their course. He is getting through his life."

That's how life feels to me, sometimes, especially my spiritual life. Just getting through. No sense of taste and smell. But I know it's not what Jesus wants for me, Jesus who says, I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly. Abundant life! That's the promise, the desire. Just getting through, going through life on spiritual autopilot, useless as a broken pot — well, it's called sloth. It's one of the deadliest of sins.

— by *Richard O. Johnson*, associate editor

Consider yourself warned



It's hard to know what to do about *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the new hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America due off the presses in

October, let alone what to say about it. We'd like to do a thorough review of it, honest, we would. And perhaps we will, but it will be later rather than sooner: how does one review a product one hasn't

yet seen?

The bits and pieces that have come out are a mixed bag — plenty of good things, some mediocre things, and some really, really unfortunate things.

Gender agenda

Among the latter we would have to include the book's Psalter. We applaud the editors for agreeing to include all 150 psalms, something the *Lutheran Book of Worship* failed to do (*LBW* includes only the psalms which are appointed for liturgical use in the Sunday lectionary). The problem is that it isn't exactly the canonical psalms that are included in the new book. Rather, the *ELW* editors have taken great liberties in preparing what is a more gender agenda-driven paraphrase than any kind of actual translation. This will not be a surprise to our readers. Pr. Erma Seaton Wolf ably pointed it out in our May issue (*FL:35:5, Emending Scripture to Suit Our Fashions*).

But there is one bit of fallout that may well take you by surprise. Sometime this fall, about the time the new book is off the press, these "emended" psalms apparently will be making their appearance in the various supplementary liturgical materials published by Augsburg Fortress, meaning bulletin inserts like *Celebrate* and *Jubilate*.

Like it or not

There seems to be some confusion at AF as to whether this will start in October or December. But if you don't cancel your subscription well ahead of time, you may find yourself using the

things, like it or not.

Presuming you like it not, what's the solution?

Well, three options occur to us. First, if you own the CD of *LBW* liturgies, that resource contains the entire Psalter in the *LBW* version. If you don't own it, you might want to buy it soon. Our guess is that it will be going out of print. Who knows, maybe they'll offer it on a clearance sale.

Second, there are numerous sites where you can find the Psalter from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which is the translation used in the *LBW*. You could cut and paste from those sites.

The third option: if you subscribe to sundaysandseasons.com, AF's on-line worship planning resource, we have been assured by John Schlobohm at AF that the *LBW/BCP* Psalter will continue to be available. That is good news indeed.

(We'll also happily put in a plug here for sundaysandseasons.com. It has lots of good stuff on it, and it is easy to use. Chaff along with the wheat, of course, but then that's real life.)

Small fixes

Any of these options may require a tad more secretarial work on the part of congregations, at least if you like the way the current resources alternate with standard and bold type to facilitate responsive singing or reading. The CD and website versions do not offer that convenience. Way it looks to us, fixing that is a small price to pay to keep using the present translation of the psalms without the pesky efforts to neuter the God-language. — by *Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Omnium gatherum



Displaced person ● Oh, golly. We inadvertently misplaced Dr. Kurt Marquart. We said he taught at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO (*FL:35:6*). He in fact teaches at Concordia, Ft. Wayne, IN.

A warning on boiled peanuts ● As you've possibly heard by now, Bp. Marcus Miller of the ELCA's Northeastern Ohio Synod has been named the new president of Lutheran Southern Theologi-

cal Seminary, Columbia, SC. We were a little startled to read the synod's news release, which suggested that Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson would be appointing an interim bishop. That, constitutionally, is the duty of the synod council. An inquiry brought assurances from ELCA Secretary Lowell Almen that the synod news release was incorrect. While the presiding bishop will be in consultation with the synod council, it is the council itself that decides whom to appoint. As of

early June, though, the Northeast Ohio Synod web site was still saying that the presiding bishop “will name an interim bishop.” Then, word was going around the synod that the presiding bishop would “suggest” a name to the synod council. That seems to us to be a little less than “name an interim bishop,” but just a tad more than “be in consultation with.” Further, it was being suggested by some that the presiding bishop would “suggest” the name of a retired bishop to do this task, or maybe “name” a retired bishop, or whatever he’s going to do. We’ve tried to think of a good reason why an interim bishop should need to be a retired bishop, but we can’t come up with one. We don’t think the Lutheran/Episcopal full communion agreement, *Called to Common Mission*, has anything to do with it, but who knows. We just wish they would all get the story straight as to who’s in charge here, and how it works. Anyway, a special synod assembly will be held in December to elect a new bishop; apparently the regular assembly, scheduled for a month or so after Bp. Miller’s announcement, didn’t allow enough time for the Holy Spirit to produce a necessary number of nominees. All that aside, everybody seems to be pleased about Bp. Miller’s new job, and we’re sure he will continue to serve the church faithfully in South Carolina. However, we would caution him on the subject of boiled peanuts, if we thought it would do any good. Alas, there are some Southern “things” he must just learn for himself.

Retired ● We didn’t use the exact word we should have last issue in announcing Ron Bagnall’s departure as editor of *Lutheran Forum*. We said

“resigned.” Actually, he is “retiring” from the editorship, as well as full-time pastoral ministry.

College kids ● Recall that all 65 ELCA synod bishops signed that plea for a “moral” federal budget. Overheard at a recent pastor’s gathering: “I find it remarkable that the Conference of Bishops aren’t of one mind on sexuality, they aren’t of one mind on abortion, they aren’t of one mind on ordination. But they are completely of one mind on federal student loans.” To which another pastor replied, “Well, they all have kids in college.”

ELW ● Maybe I’m missing something. I’ve looked over *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* materials as they’ve arrived. Aside from the Psalms, I cannot see a lot about which to object, confessionally or theologically. I like the layout and design very much, and that’s important for any pew edition. I did not notice any liturgical misuse of the Triune Name, but then, no one has seen all the material yet. Perhaps we’re being shown only the least objectionable elements. I am disappointed, though, with the music, based on the CD sampler. There was nothing that excited me and I expected something better or more provocative, or edgy, or, oh, tuneful. Tuneful would have been nice. But I didn’t find it, not on first hearing. Not on the second one, either. Mostly, I just do not see this book “taking over” the way the *LBW* did from the *SBH*. Worship styles are so fractured these days that any uniformity (a long-honored Lutheran dream back to the Common Service) seems more happenstance than design. But, I’m open for instruction. Feel free to differ.

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