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Foolishness and self-delusion



“Repentance is the doorway to the spiritual life, the only way to begin. It is also the path itself, the only way to continue. Anything else is foolishness and self-delusion. Only repentance is both brute-honest enough, and joyous enough, to bring us all the way home. . . The starting point for the early church was this awareness of the abyss of sin inside each person, the murky depths of which only the top few inches are visible. God, who is all clarity and light, wants to make us perfect as he is perfect, shot through with his radiance. The first step in our healing, then, is not being comforted. It is taking a hard look at the cleansing that needs to be done. This is not condemnation, but right diagnosis. . . . It is not false guilt, because a lot of the guilt we feel is in fact deserved; we *are* guilty. Forgiveness of past sins doesn’t cure the sickness in the heart that continues to yearn after more. We will remain sick until that healing begins, and it will be a lifelong process. What a relief it is to admit this.” –Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Illumined Heart: The Ancient Christian Path of Transformation* (Paraclete Press, 2001)

An unexpected journey



It was more than two years ago now that we answered the phone to hear the tearful voice of our daughter. She was calling from Slovakia, and it was three in the morning her time. She had just received shocking news about the parents of one of her high school friends. Married 29 years, they were in the midst of a bitter divorce. That morning the husband (so it was reported) had brutally killed his wife and then tried (unsuccessfully, it turned out) to kill himself.

These were people well-respected and actively involved in our community. My wife and I had known them fifteen years or more. We had been in their home several times, and the husband – let’s call him “Jack” – had done some landscaping work for us. My wife had worked with his wife at school, and they were good friends; our daughters had long been close.

Only the Shadow knows

How could this happen? This was the question on everyone’s mind over the next days. A memorial service for the wife was held a week or two later in a local school auditorium (they were not church people), and the shock was still palpable. Candles were lit. A petition was going around demanding that bail not be granted – a prospect which seemed highly unlikely to me, and besides, Jack was still in ICU in critical condition after his self-inflicted injury. But anger

must be directed somewhere, and people must feel they can do *something*, and so the petition was making the rounds.

Of course in a theological sense, this incident, while shocking, was not really surprising. The old radio show asked, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Only the Shadow knows." But we know too, we Christians. We know "there is a voice of rebellion deep in the heart of the wicked," and we know that we hear that voice, every one of us.

Sometimes the voice calls on a massive scale, impossible to comprehend. The Nazi atrocities of the 1940's, the Rwandan genocide of the 1990's, and other incidents too numerous to mention—masses of ordinary people doing horrifying things. "The banality of evil," Hannah Arendt called it. She had in mind Eichmann and the Holocaust, but sometimes it occurs on a more localized scale, as with my friends. Horrifying still, and harder to objectify.

By nature sinful

How could this happen? I don't need to look far to find the answer. It is in my own heart, where that voice of rebellion also whispers. I'd like to think that a person who kills another is a monster, but more often he is just an ordinary person who does a monstrous thing. Indeed, if there is a monster, it lives in me, too. It was Luther's very wise insight to say that the fifth commandment means we are not to hurt our neighbor in any way, but help him in all his physical needs. I don't live up to it.

How could this happen? I only need to turn the question back on myself. How could it happen that I spoke that angry word which hurt my neighbor—as I intended it to do? How could it happen that I walked by on the other side when I saw the man on the Jericho road? Not the same as a vicious murder, I protest in my self-righteousness. Ah, but it is of the same stuff. It comes from the same place. It can happen because we human beings are by nature sinful; it can happen because the human heart is a mystery, and it twists and turns in ways we cannot control.

"Sin is couching at the door." That line from Genesis 4 has always been one of the most terrifying in Scripture for me, because I know it to be true. And so a vicious murder is shocking; but it is not really surprising. Very little about human beings is, in the end, surprising. It is, after all, why we need a

redeemer. It is why God sent his Son.

Locker room encounter

It was several months later that I began to visit Jack in jail. How did that come to pass? He had recovered from his injury and had been transferred back to our county jail to await trial. There were occasional articles in the local paper, as motions were filed and pre-trial maneuvering went on. One such article included a photo of Jack's attorney, and I recognized him as a man who belongs to the same gym as I. A few days after that we happened to be alone in the locker room, and I introduced myself. I asked how Jack was doing—an odd question, perhaps, but what else does one say?

Further conversation revealed that Jack had received no visitors in all those months, other than his parents. Apparently all his friends were among the petition signers. I gave the attorney my card and said, "Tell Jack that I'd be happy to visit him, if that's something he'd like." Next time I saw the attorney, he said, "Yes, he'd really appreciate it." So I started going.

In the beginning it was awkward. We hadn't ever had a serious conversation about anything, and now we were talking about the most serious things imaginable. I didn't really think of these as pastoral visits, though I learned quickly that if I used that term with the jail officials it had some advantages (no time limit; didn't count as his one allowed daily visit, so his parents could still come that day).

Trying to make sense of it

Jack, it turns out, had actually been raised in a fairly conservative Christian home, but hadn't been much interested in faith for some years. Now, in jail, that was changing—not due to my visits, certainly, but more to conversations with some of the people who do jail ministry. Each time I went, he would have his Bible with him, and he would have questions to ask. He was clearly trying to come to terms, if that's the right expression, with what he had done, and to make some sense of the horrible direction his life had taken.

There was no question that he had killed his wife. What seemed strange is that his memory of it was extremely disjointed. It turned out that he, in the midst of this divorce, had been on a pretty strong anti-depressant, and he had stopped it sud-

denly (a no-no). There had been other instances where this particular drug, when stopped abruptly, had provoked violent episodes. Had that happened here? It became the defense's "theory of the case."

Small town justice

It was nearly two years before he came to trial. The politics of it all were fascinating. Fairly early on, the district attorney had indicated he would not be seeking the death penalty, though the charge was first degree murder. A motion for a change of venue was granted – the first time in anyone's memory such a motion had succeeded in my county. It was based largely on the inflammatory publicity surrounding this case in a small town. At the last minute the assigned judge was taken off the case when it was revealed that he was romantically involved with a friend of the victim. Like I said, small town. The trial was set for a city a hundred miles away, with a new judge.

A month or so before the trial date, I was called by an investigator for the attorney, who wanted to ask me some questions. We chatted for quite a while, and in the end he asked me if I would be willing to be a witness for the defense. I suppose this amounted to what is sometimes called a "character witness," though there was more to it than that. The prosecution had tried to paint Jack as a violent man, a time bomb who had just been waiting to explode. The defense wanted to show that for some years prior to this episode, Jack had been regarded by his friends and acquaintances as an ordinary guy, with no obvious propensity toward violence. I said I would be willing to testify.

Afterwards, I wondered if that had been entirely wise. Given the strong emotions about this case in the community, who knows what reaction might be engendered – and especially from my wife's colleagues, who had known and loved Jack's wife and were still understandably furious at what he had done. I also did not want to jeopardize my daughter's friendship with Jack's daughter. But of course I really didn't believe I had any choice. If I could be supportive in some way, I needed to do it.

Guilty as charged

So I testified, but as it turned out, hardly anyone knew. The local paper apparently couldn't afford to give full coverage to a trial out of town,

and it was the defense's case that got ignored; there were no reporters there the day I was called. I'm not sure I helped the case much, though Jack later said to me, "Well, you helped *me* just by being there."

Jack was found guilty of first degree murder, and sentenced to twenty-six years to life in prison without possibility of parole. Mandatory sentencing guidelines in the State of California gave the judge no option – not that he seemed inclined to show any kind of mercy. His one concession was to grant the defense's request that the time Jack spent in the hospital under guard be credited as time in custody.

The sentencing itself was filled with raw emotion. The victim's siblings, her best friend, and one daughter all made statements, or had statements read. The gist of them was the same: the defendant is a despicable person who deserves to rot in prison for the rest of his life for what he did, not just to his wife but to the rest of us. The rage is understandable, of course, though there were parts of it that seemed irrational. They accused him of showing no remorse, and then insisted that even if he did show remorse, they wouldn't believe it.

A crueler prison

For what it's worth, when Jack got his turn to speak, he did indeed express remorse. And, from the expressions on faces, they indeed did not believe him. I suspect that, while they may think they can now "get past this," that's not going to happen. In one sense, one never really gets past such a tragedy. In a deeper sense, bitterness and an inability to find forgiveness is a crueler prison than any the State of California has to offer. When I came out of the courthouse, a cold rain had started to fall. It was not as cold as the grief in my heart, a multi-layered grief that I, too, will carry with me for a while.

The only issue remaining now is which state prison will be Jack's new home. It will likely be too far away for me to visit him, but I will try to write. And to pray for him. And to pray for his daughters, that they might find some kind of resolution and even forgiveness.

Something very wrong

A couple of weeks after the trial, I chatted with the attorney at the gym. He was glum. I know defense attorneys are considered bleeding hearts, overly sympathetic toward criminals. But he was

full of interesting statistics. The United States has a higher percentage of its residents behind bars than any other nation in the world – beating out Russia, Belarus, and South Africa. The hard number exceeds two million, with another five million on probation or parole. We obviously are doing something wrong here, he said. I'd have to agree.

It may well be that someone like Jack needs to spend a long time in prison to “pay” for what he did; but what does it accomplish to keep him there for the rest of his life? He shows no sign of being a danger to society. From what I can see, he's been a model prisoner – cooperative, helpful, in many ways a positive example for other prisoners, who tend, in a county jail, to be misguided but impressionable young men.

One of my last visits with Jack was shortly before sentencing. He was a little agitated – anxious, he said, to find out where he was going, to get there and begin to settle in for the rest of his life. But he was also anxious about meaning and purpose – wondering if his life will have any. That was a striking thought to me; it had never occurred to me that a prison inmate might contemplate his vocation. I told him that God could use him to good effect even in prison – that he would likely have some kind of job in prison that might give some meaning. I suggested that he could continue to be a kind of mentor for younger prisoners, that he could continue to write (something he had begun in jail), that he could certainly continue to pray for others. That seemed to help him shift his thinking just a bit.

To all who are imprisoned

I do not know if there will be more to this story. I suspect my encounters with Jack over the past couple of years will continue to affect me in a variety of ways. I do know that I am grateful for the opportunity to walk with him, even rather minimally, on a difficult path. When I am praying the Litany now, the line that asks God “to be merciful to all who are imprisoned” takes on a new meaning, even a kind of passion. It always seems more powerful, after all, to pray for specific people rather than just for categories.

The whole affair has also made me more mindful of the humanity of those we often marginalize, those we think of as “other.” The criminal, even the murderer, is somebody's son, somebody's friend. If we could help others to see that more clearly, it might be a first step toward solving some of the problems of our criminal justice system – problems caused or exacerbated by our willingness to dehumanize those of whom we are afraid.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is developing a social statement on criminal justice. I've not been a big fan of social statements, but this one now seems more interesting to me. If the church could help us figure out how to balance justice with mercy; if we could think together about how to correct some of the clear problems with our current system; if we could help Lutherans see, not just the crimes, but the humanity of those we imprison – then such a statement could be a salutary thing.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

The university with a Lutheran heritage



Several times in various contexts I've heard people who hail from the South make much of the fact (if fact it is – I'm not from the South) that Yankees, when introduced to someone for the first time, ask, “What do you do?” or “Where are you from?” while Southerners often ask, “Who are your people?” Long after losing the war, the culture of the local, of kinship, of ordered loyalties, of half-wistful, half-defiant rootedness remains in the South. Who are your people? It would be beneath you to think to rise above them. It would never occur to you to define yourself apart from them. They are a part of you, often (probably

when you least suspect it) the best part of you.

Lately I've had to re-evaluate my own answers to this question in terms of my relationship with Valparaiso University and the LCMS, and whom I can claim as “my people.” Readers may remember my article (November, 2006) regarding the issue of homosexuality at Valpo. The morning after that came out there was a message waiting for me when I got to work from VU's Director of Church Relations who was upset that I had been so publicly and, he thought, unfairly critical of Valpo. Before the article was published, I had edited out several paragraphs, which I would now like to share:

Criticizing my family

"When I criticize Valparaiso University, I do so in the manner of one criticizing a member of his own family. I grew up in Valparaiso, where my father was a professor. We went to the Chapel for special services (our Immanuel grade school choirs always sang there Christmas Eve, thus forever securing a prominent place for VU in the holy area of the memory devoted to childhood Christmases and Easters). I was a ball-boy for the football team, which my dad helped coach. I cheered the basketball team way past my bedtime in the old Hilltop gym, back before we were any good, though both Larry Bird and Mark Aguire played against us there with highly ranked teams, winning easily. (If memory serves, we were robbed by the refs. That happened a lot back then.)

"I hung around with other profs' kids, watching cheap movies in Niels Science Center or bowling in the student union when I was in junior high and high school. And in due time I went to college there, as did my father before me and a lot of my childhood friends and all four of my siblings and a slew of aunts, uncles, and cousins, and also in-laws. So, as is typical of in-family criticism, my complaint here might seem especially personal and pained, but it rests upon an almost unbreakable connection. The university could dedicate itself to communist revolution and I'd still likely buy a ludicrously overpriced VU sweatshirt.

"That having been said, I am nothing if not a son (and now pastor) of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Both my parents were LCMS teachers. Both my grandfathers were fairly prominent LCMS pastors. In fact, my Grandpa Speckhard was himself a son and grandson of LCMS pastors, and many of the women in the family tree were LCMS pastors' daughters. And so forth ad nauseum. I attended seminary at both Ft. Wayne and St. Louis (transferred due to my wife's Latin teaching job prospects). And I am a son of the LCMS not merely by breeding and tradition. As best as I can tell (though introspection yields dicey data), I can honestly say that I am part of it because I believe in it; I do not believe in it because I am a part of it. And therein lies the problem.

"In my dad's day (and my mom's day, but she went to Concordia, Seward, for both high school and college, so she doesn't figure in the point I'm meandering toward) it was not only possible, but things were actually so designed, that people would become both faithful children of the LCMS and loyal Valpo alums. Only with an increasing degree of schizophrenia can I pull that off."

That is what I wrote, but never published, a little over a year ago.

Trying to keep it together

As you can probably tell, my answer to the questions "where are you from," "what do you do," and "who are your people," would practically be one and the same. Valpo/LCMS/Ministry pretty well defines me, and I've always seen relative consonance in blending those three aspects of my identity into one. Certainly the relationship between Valpo and the LCMS has been frosty at best for several decades, but I have always been out there trying to keep them together.

I always knew there was nothing official about the relationship between the two; that was part of the point of Valpo. In my mind it was an LCMS school, but without the official institutional controls. When friends in the LCMS pooh-poohed that idea and expressed disdain for my view that Valpo was part of the mission of the LCMS (or vice-versa), I always said that Valpo was exceptional. I pointed out that LCMS folks had bought the university specifically as a church-related mission for the LCMS to have an educated laity, as the Concordias were all specifically geared for the training of church workers. Its famous chapel was built via a synod-wide appeal. Its named buildings were all named for LCMS folks. Its presidents were all LCMS clergymen.

When my father got his Ph.D. and left Denver Lutheran High for Valpo, in his mind he was continuing his vocation as a teacher in the LCMS. I inherited this view of Valpo from him. It made sense to me to say that Valpo and the LCMS were part and parcel of the same mission, that Valpo was an LCMS school, but in a unique way.

Making exceptions

Because I saw Valpo as exceptional, I had no problem making exceptions for it. When my congregation's education board established a scholarship program for any member attending a synodical school and majoring in church work, I made sure Valpo was specifically included by name, and helped convince one future church worker to attend there. When our Seward-trained DCE took a group of our high school youth on a tour of some of the Concordias, I got them to stop at Valpo, too. Our bulletin board in the church hallway included posters advertising for Valpo as well as the nearby Concordias of Mequon and St. Paul. When our music director was looking for a touring choir to come lead

a service (we had the St. Louis seminary last year), I hooked him up with Valpo's touring choir.

Please understand, I did these things with the operating assumption that Valpo was in a sense an LCMS enterprise – not officially, but in history and purpose. "My people" in my congregation, in the LCMS and at Valpo were in my mind the same people. Not everyone shared my view, of course. Many have always considered Valpo a generically Lutheran or even just generic school. So when I gave my spiel about Valpo being unique, an LCMS university with a difference, many inside and outside the LCMS disagreed with me, sometimes nastily. And as it happens, they were right, not in how they said it maybe, but certainly in what they said.

Coming to a realization

I finally realized what many people had always known about Valpo when the VU Board of Directors recently named a successor to the retiring Alan Harre. The announcement on Valpo's website reads:

VALPARAISO, Ind. – A Colorado educator with more than a decade of administrative experience has been named president of Valparaiso University effective July 1. Mark A. Heckler, 52, provost and vice chancellor for academic and student affairs at University of Colorado Denver, will become the 18th president in Valparaiso's nearly 150-year history and will replace Alan F. Harre, who is retiring June 30 after 20 years as president.

After thirteen paragraphs detailing Mr. Heckler's many qualifications (he'll be Dr. Heckler soon) and explaining how excited everyone at Valpo is about getting him, it notes that "Heckler, who attends St. Philip Lutheran Church in Littleton, Colo., said he is pleased to have the opportunity to be associated with a faith-based institution."

Unlike all his predecessors since the university first became Lutheran, Mark Heckler is not a clergyman, and not a member of the LCMS (St. Philip is an ELCA congregation). So the idea that the university is in some sense an LCMS enterprise doesn't hold. I stand corrected.

The phrase "faith-based" kind of grinds my gears a little, but I guess it is better than nothing.

The word "Christian" never makes it into the announcement. "Lutheran" makes it twice – in the name of the congregation he attends and in the phrase "Lutheran heritage" in the seventeenth paragraph. The LCMS gets no mention, either, though I'm told President-elect Heckler did acknowledge the LCMS contribution to Valpo in his acceptance speech, which was nice of him.

Not my vision

I have nothing against the new president. I don't know him, but I'm sure they wouldn't have picked him if he weren't an accomplished, energetic leader, capable of fulfilling the vision the Board of Directors apparently has for Valpo. It is just that their vision evidently isn't my vision, and I find their vision uninteresting. But it isn't President-elect Heckler's fault that I have been laboring under a misconception about Valpo.

Nevertheless, I greeted the news of his election with the sense of one who just found out the family farm had been sold. Sure, it is exciting that the new corporate owners will make it a bigger and more efficient farm. And it is nice that the LCMS family and I are welcome to stay on as part of the new management team. But it isn't the same, and I am sad about it. What I used to see as mine, as something as much a part of me as "my people" are a part of me, is now . . . well, again, maybe I should let them speak for themselves. At the end of the announcement from the VU website it says this:

Valparaiso University is a comprehensive university with a Lutheran heritage that enrolls nearly 4,000 students on its campus 55 miles southeast of Chicago. It has been identified as one of the top master's-level institutions in the Midwest by *U.S. News & World Report* magazine for the past 19 years, and most recently was ranked among the top three in academic quality for the eighth consecutive year.

Rooting for Valpo

Sigh. The poster is down from our narthex bulletin board. The Valpo exception will soon be gone from our education board's scholarship. I just can't justify making an exception for something that chooses to be so unexceptional, that describes as its "heritage" what I describe as my purpose go-

ing forward, and that can no longer plausibly claim to be a partner in mission with my people in the LCMS, except insofar as it claims to be a comprehensive partner in mission with all things faith-based. Valpo's defining president, O. P. Kretzmann, brought my father to teach at "a comprehensive university with a Lutheran heritage"? No. He had a far grander, if not lasting, vision.

I'll still root for Valpo. It is my hometown and alma mater. It will always be my answer to the question "where are you from?" But I won't treat it as unique or exceptional, or as in any sense in spe-

cial partnership with the LCMS. It's a good school, in the top handful for its size in the Midwest, right in there along with the rest of the top handful.

But it isn't what I thought it was. And I suspect I thought it was something more, not less, than it now claims to be. In rising above its LCMS heritage, I can't help but think it is not only losing a part of itself, but the best part of itself.

But maybe not. I've been wrong about Valpo before.

—by associate editor Peter Speckhard

A response to George Murphy



While I appreciate the time George L. Murphy took to respond to my article on the six-day creation ("A bright guy like you," November, 2007) with his own thoughts on the subject ("The queen should listen to her ministers," January, 2008), I was disappointed that he did not in any way engage the argument of my article. Murphy mischaracterizes my position as, "If we are to believe in Jesus' resurrection, supposedly we must believe in six-day creation." That characterization fails at every level beginning with the factual.

My article did not deal with Jesus' resurrection, but the general resurrection at the last day as confessed in the Apostles' Creed when we say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." The distinction makes all the difference in the world in terms of the point, because the resurrection at the last day is a supernatural event of general applicability and knowable in advance and therefore to be treated as a datum not subject to natural investigation.

I fully acknowledge that a scientific investigation into the nature of matter and organic bodies would come down conclusively against the idea of a general resurrection, yet we confess it as a fact anyway. It is a given, and if science presumes to disprove it, it has become unscientific, treating givens as variables and the supernatural as natural. Creation *ex nihilo* and the resurrection of the body are both doctrinal certainties and supernatural events knowable only via revelation and not fit subjects for purely natural investigation.

Dr. Murphy confuses the issue by suggesting that my take on creation and the resurrection neces-

sitates disregarding science in general. He makes the point that only via science do we understand the topography of the Middle East as described in the Bible, or interpret the languages of the Scriptures. And I agree. When it comes to natural things like languages and landscapes, we seek to understand them via natural investigation. But I wasn't talking about that. It is sloppy logic to suggest that if one rejects scientific investigations of the supernatural, then one must reject scientific investigations of the natural.

Where'd that tree come from?

Dr. Murphy then quotes Pascal, who made an argument in reference to Augustine and Aquinas that when the Scriptures contradict our senses, we must reinterpret the Scriptures in another way. But the event of creation is not before us or available to our senses. Only the result of that event is in any way tangible or apprehensible.

If I encounter a tree, I can say for certain there is a tree there, but I cannot say for certain how it got there or how long it has been there. If one man says the tree has been there for years, ever since the wind-blown seed landed, and another man says, no, it was transplanted the previous spring, and another man says that actually aliens from space put it there the previous day, there is nothing about how my senses interact with the tree for me to take a side in that argument. All I know going strictly by my senses is that there is a tree there. Everything else depends on what I think about the three men arguing. Similarly, that there is a creation is something

we all agree on. How it came to be is not available to our senses. We can only decide what revelation to trust.

I agree with Dr. Murphy that there is overwhelming scientific evidence that the earth is billions of years old, with the stipulation that there is also overwhelming scientific evidence, from biology to chemistry to physics, that the dead will not be raised. Where will Dr. Murphy place his faith? In the scientific evidence, or in an otherwise absurd statement of Scripture? Or is the resurrection as con-

fessed in the creed another profound theological statement about God and humanity that will never actually happen?

Lastly, Dr. Murphy warns that my take on creation repels young Christians and seekers from the church. I would argue that more people leave the church disillusioned due to the debunking of Bible stories by leaders in the church than due to the church's intransigence when it comes to accepting evolution.

—by associate editor Peter Speckhard

Omnium gatherum



We should have told you • Some of you were so excited by our January review of *The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, vol. 2, that you wanted to rush right out and buy it, but you failed to find it at Amazon.com. We forgot to tell you to visit www.Piepkorn.info, which will take you to the site of the Center for Evangelical Catholicity. You can order it there.

Great minds • Another great issue just out from our companion publication, *Lutheran Forum*. Observant readers might note that the editor there, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, echoed many of the sentiments expressed in the January *Forum Letter* regarding the ELCA's forthcoming social statement on sexuality. Or we echoed her. Or, to be honest, we're both on

the same page about this, and came up with some similar comments without any prior collaboration or discussion. Pr. Wilson's prescription for attacking Biblical illiteracy wasn't part of our commentary, but it is well worth pondering.

The cost of living • Gasoline isn't the only commodity that keeps increasing in price, even if it's the one we notice most regularly. When it comes time for you to renew your *Lutheran Forum/Forum Letter* package subscription, you'll notice a modest increase. It is, alas, a necessary cost of doing business, and due entirely to increased postage rates, not editorial extravagance. The new rates will be \$26.95 for one year; \$48.95 for two years; \$21.50 for students and retired persons. It is still, you will certainly agree, a bargain.

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