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The marvel of the Psalter



Among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed and, seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Saviour's coming or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about *yourself*. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries.

— St. Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus* (included in an edition of *On the Incarnation*, St. Vladimir's Press, 1998)

The looming Episcopal train wreck



Lutherans, and especially those who are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, have watched the looming train wreck that is the Episcopal Church with dismay. Conflict and controversy over the ordination of openly gay and partnered Bishop Gene Robinson has led to serious tensions within the entire Anglican communion. A steady stream of congregations has withdrawn from the denomination, and the bishops have usually responded by filing law suits and trying to hold on to congregational property. In December, the Diocese of San Joaquin (in Central California) formally disassociated itself from the Episcopal Church—the first time since the Civil War that such a thing has happened. Other dioceses are reportedly on the verge of following San Joaquin.

The reaction of the church's leaders—and particularly the presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori—has been, one must say, disturbing. The very public chastising and disciplining of the dissident bishops, as well as the grasping struggle to maintain church property, is a horrendous witness to the world. Once the pagans said, "See how these Christians love one another." It's hard to imagine anyone saying that about the Episcopalians these days.

Partial communion with the Hare Krishnas

As if that weren't bad enough, things keep happening which make it increasingly difficult for many Lutherans to understand what it means that we are in "full communion" with the Episcopal Church. The latest episode was an

“Indian Rite Mass” held in January at St. John’s Cathedral in Los Angeles, which appears from the press reports to have been a kind of interfaith service with the Vedanta Society and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishna folks).

This event featured the reading of a statement by Bishop Jon Bruno (who was absent due to the death of a family friend) in which he apologized for Christian efforts to proselytize Hindus, and renounced any such proselytism in the future. We Lutherans used to call that evangelism, of course, but apparently the good bishop doesn’t think Christ is good news for Hindus.

But the most remarkable thing about this mass was that all (including the Hindus) were invited to receive Holy Communion – at least that’s what the initial *Los Angeles Times* article said. A subsequent correction in the paper said that, while all came forward, only the Christians were “encouraged” to receive, and that “some of those” partaking of the Eucharist were actually Christians in Indian dress. Somehow this doesn’t make one feel much better about the whole situation.

No stone-casting here

Of course inviting the unbaptized to communion is not a folly only of Episcopalians; many ELCA Lutherans have succumbed to it as well, even though the ELCA’s official statement of sacramental practices, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, does not allow for it. The usual justification for such a practice is some sentimental idea that the Eucharist might in fact serve as a “converting ordinance” (to use old language) that would draw someone to Christ. One can disagree strongly with that argument and still think it has some coherence. But by what possible justification does one invite people who actively and devoutly practice a non-Christian religion to share in the Body and Blood of Christ? – and particularly when one has just emphasized that one has no intention of proselytizing?

All of which leads one to wonder just what it might mean that we are in full communion with this church. Certainly our full communion agreement makes it clear that each church will refrain from meddling in the affairs of the other; but it also speaks of interdependence. If the Episcopal Church

is sliding into schism, how do we continue to live out this relationship? If events such as the Episcopal/Hindu mass described above can take place at an Episcopal Cathedral, in what sense can we pretend that we recognize the Episcopal Church as a “catholic and apostolic church holding the essentials of the Christian faith”?

The first paragraph of the current agreement endorses, as the meaning of “full communion,” a statement of an earlier international Anglican/Lutheran consultation. One wonders what significance that might have if, as seems increasingly possible, the Episcopal Church’s relationship with the Anglican communion comes undone.

Watching friends divorce

Yes, we watch what’s going on over there with dismay. It is, as some have put it, like watching two friends going through a divorce. One does not want to take sides, and yet one often has opinions about who is responsible for what. But does our full communion agreement mean that we have already taken sides, and that we are stuck with whatever group holds on to the corporate identity of the Episcopal Church? What if the “dissidents” have a better claim to representing both the catholicity and the apostolicity of the church? ELCA leaders and those who serve on joint committees with the Episcopal Church need to ask themselves, if the Episcopal Church splits, just with whom we are then in full communion. That’s a question that should certainly be discussed with the Episcopalians, and we trust it will be.

Not that we’re too optimistic about such a discussion. In January, we understand, the Executive Board of the Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers met in Florida, and one item on the agenda was the question of how Lutherans on the territory of the Diocese of San Joaquin (or any future renegade diocese) ought to behave toward different sides in the Episcopal civil war.

The Episcopalian ecumenists were agreed that it would be “appropriate” for an ELCA congregation to offer worship space to a “remnant” of loyal Episcopalians who have left a congregation that has gone with the break-away diocese. On the other hand, it would be “inappropriate” for an ELCA congregation to offer shelter to any dissident congrega-

tion which finds itself evicted from its property by action of the diocese. From here it would seem that what is “inap-propriate” is Episcopalians telling ELCA congregations whom they can and cannot welcome, but of course this is not an uncommon scenario when friends divorce. You get pulled in. Each party expects your loyalty, and is offended at the very idea of someone trying to remain friends with the other party.

Prudent and faithful

These are painful questions. We pray for the Episcopal Church, for the healing of its wounds, for faithful and wise leaders to discover a way out of the terrible situation in which they find themselves. But at some point some one needs to ask: Can we continue to be in “full communion” with the Episcopal Church? Would it not be prudent and faithful at least to signal our discomfort with what is happening?

Back when the American Lutheran Church was in altar and pulpit fellowship with the Lutheran

Church—Missouri Synod, the latter body voted a “state of fellowship in protest” over certain issues (and, regrettably, that ultimately led to the ending of altar and pulpit fellowship between the two). Maybe now is the time for the ELCA to express its concern in some serious way. Perhaps suspending the full communion agreement is a step too far, and “full communion in protest” seems a little too, well, Missourian for the ELCA. But how about a statement or resolution of some kind expressing our deep concern for the Episcopal church, and especially for the future of the relationship? How about some kind of acknowledgment that we take full communion so seriously that if the premises on which it was approved seem to be unraveling, we will be conscience-bound to reexamine things?

The alternative seems to be just to shake our heads, cluck our tongues, and say it really isn’t our business. But what kind of “full communion” is that?

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Interfaith dialogue: fudging the facts

by Erma Seaton Wolf



“Bishop’s daughter studies for the rabbiniate” was the lead on the cover of the January 2008 issue of *The Lutheran*. Inside, the article bore the title, “‘We try to learn from each other’: In this family, dad is a bishop and daughter is soon to be a rabbi.” I confess that I closed the magazine with a feeling of dread. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know how *The Lutheran* would approach this story, a story about different faiths in the family of a church leader. Hoping that I was misjudging the author and the editor, I opened the magazine again and turned the pages, and began to read.

Perhaps you saw the article. It was a feature, a human interest piece on the new bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod, B. Penrose Hoover, and his relationship with his daughter, Heidi. It lifted up the unique quality of that relationship, based on the fact that the bishop’s daughter had converted to Reform Judaism and is now studying to become a rabbi. Her attendance at her father’s installation

brought her conversion to the public eye, as she participated in the service by chanting the Old Testament lesson in the Hebrew, wearing the traditional prayer shawl.

Can both be right?

The article traced the journey made by the bishop and his daughter through her conversion, with such leads as “Supportive from the start” and “Both can be right.” Clearly, from *The Lutheran’s* perspective this is an example of how diversity within a family can be a positive experience, even when different faiths are confessed. The last paragraph even contained a lesson on how important it is to embrace interfaith dialogue.

In order to explain the depths of the disappointment that I have with how *The Lutheran* handled this story, even with its decision to feature this story at all, I have to explain my own situation. Like Bishop Hoover, I have a close family member who converted to Reform Judaism. My sister’s conver-

sion took place several years ago. At that time I expressed that I would never fully understand her decision, but that she was my sister and nothing would ever change that. She had been estranged from the Lutheran church, and the Christian faith, for some time. Her deepening involvement and decision to convert was the first positive step she had made in regards to faith in a god in years. I chose to respect my sister's decision and commend her to God in my prayers, asking that his will be done in her life.

I can appreciate the difficult nature of such a situation within a family. I want to be clear: I do not judge the bishop for his decisions, either regarding how he treats his daughter or to have her participate in his installation. While I doubt that I would have made the same choice if I had been in his shoes, the fact is that I am not in his shoes. Every family has its own dynamics and its own history. I think Bishop Hoover and his daughter are deserving of our prayers in the path they are traveling.

Renouncing the faith

The decisions of *The Lutheran*, however, both to run with this story and, following that, the treatment of it in this article, are another matter. This is not a story about "interfaith dialogue." Rather, it is a story about what happens when one member of a family renounces the faith held by that family and embraces a different faith, one that holds a claim that is contrary to the other. To state as *The Lutheran* did that "Both can be right" is to reveal ignorance of both Judaism and Christianity, and to show respect for neither.

Proponents and leaders in the Jewish faith are very clear about this: Jesus was not the promised Messiah. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not supported in any way in modern Judaism. Any dialogue between Christians and Jews which tries to "fudge" these facts is engaging in misguided delusion, and will go nowhere until there is respectful honesty regarding what the two faiths profess most deeply.

What the article in *The Lutheran* failed to acknowledge is that there is a difference between those who are Jewish from birth and those who convert to Judaism from Christianity. In the latter situation, there is necessarily a falling away from, if not an outright renunciation of, the confession that Jesus is Lord. It should always be troubling to us as Chris-

tians when another baptized Christian loses faith in Jesus and turns to any other religion, even if it be one as close to us as Judaism. That we can respect the decisions of those who choose conversion to another faith does not mean that we should celebrate, as if faith in Jesus did not matter.

Just being nice

I wish *The Lutheran* had chosen to publish an article on the dynamics within families that are experiencing this situation of a family member's conversion to another faith. It would have been interesting to see this explored from the viewpoint of a family in the Jewish tradition that experiences a member's embrace of Christianity, to see both the similarities and the differences. Even to recognize that such events within a family can have very different outcomes would have been helpful. At least to acknowledge that there can be deep grief and concern for what such conversion means not only for relationships now but for one's eternal salvation in the Kingdom of God, would have shown respect for those thoughts and emotions.

As it is, this article chose to ignore all of that. It focused, instead, on being open and tolerant of the religious choices of family members who used to be Christians. In stressing the strength and wholesomeness of this particular father-daughter relationship, the article chose to "be nice" and not ask troubling questions about the truth-claims Christianity makes regarding Jesus Christ and the God we confess in the Creeds. The impression I took away from this article is that to be troubled by such conversion means that one is close-minded and intolerant, perhaps even anti-Jewish. For those who, like me and my family, still struggle with what such conversion means, this article in *The Lutheran* is no help at all.

Perhaps I am overreacting, due to my closeness to the subject matter. Nevertheless, I must say that when I see *The Lutheran* take what appears to me to be a stand that conversion away from faith in Jesus Christ is of no consequence, perhaps even a positive thing, I am deeply troubled. I am wondering why I continue to read the magazine at all.

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Book review: *Augustine and the Catechumenate*



Augustine and the Catechumenate by William Harmless, S.J. (Liturgical Press, 1995; ISBN 978-0814661321). Reviewed

by Peter C. Garrison.

This book is a delightful combination of scholarly insight and catechetical cheerleading. It was written in order to compare and contrast ancient instruction to the the modern Roman Catholic Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program.

RCIA implies that the instruction of the Church leads the catechumens to a “progressive change of outlook and conduct.” Harmless shows that in the early church, bishops were interested in the moral life already being lived by the catechumens. One didn’t join the church hoping to believe and through believing live a better life; one had better be living a moral life before, during and after conversion. Practitioners of some occupations simply were not allowed to enroll: prostitutes, eunuchs, magicians, astrologers; others such as teachers and soldiers were accepted under tight reins.

RCIA does not imply continuing the “centuries-old habit of privatizing Christian initiation.” Rather, initiation is to be publicly displayed and publicly honored. This, Harmless states, is in keeping with the patristic era. Harmless quotes “ancient sacramentaries and Church orders, . . . patristic sermons and apologetic works – not romantic visions of the long-ago Church, but a forgotten wisdom, a psychological sensitivity, a pastoral realism – a wisdom that, despite its antiquity, [seems] surprisingly contemporary.”

Why Augustine?

But why Augustine? Harmless notes the riches of applied theology left by the saint of Hippo. We have 35 sermons to neophytes and 22 to catechumens. He is the only patristic author who writes of each of the four periods of ancient initiation: evangelization, catechumenate, Lent, and mystagogy.

With this introduction, Harmless takes us into the world of Augustine’s instruction. The emphasis becomes the “where” of his catechesis (physical setting, liturgical context, audience), the method (rhetorical techniques, affective tenor, language), and the motive (rhetorical aims and princi-

ples, view of Scripture). Lengthy footnotes and quotations lend depth and color to Harmless’s descriptions.

We imagine Augustine’s world being one of candle-lit sanctuaries; of the saint seated facing a standing crowd which would sigh and laugh with his rhetorical trapeze acts, moan and weep at his admonitions, cheer at his calls to repentance and good works.

Augustine understood Cicero’s advice to speak in order to, “teach, to delight and to motivate.” (*De doctrina christiana* 4.12.27 quoting Cicero’s *Orator* 69). And he would use the three styles of subdued (*summissa*), moderate (*temperata*), and the grand (*grandis*). He would look at the simple meaning of the Scripture’s storyline (*factum adivimus*), and then delve into the mystery therein revealed (*mysterium requiramus*).

Like Luther, Augustine knew that any mystery would be there for all to see – and that the plainest interpretation of the historical facts shown in the Bible were the most correct. Also, any mystery so revealed must be in line with the entire revelation of Scripture and Tradition. One didn’t suddenly discover another gospel lurking in an odd interpretation of the text: “Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly elsewhere [in Scripture]” (*De doctrina christiana* 2.6.8).

Catechetical techniques

Harmless then cheers the reader on to put into practice the charming and stirring rhetorical habits of Augustine. He outlines several devices which modern teachers may use with their catechumens:

The Epigram. This might be an easy-to-remember definition of a sacrament (“One thing is seen, something else understood”); or the link between liturgy and life (“Together we drink, because together we live”).

The Antithesis: He called his students to “fast from hatred and feast on love”; he denounced Christians who “praise God with the tongue and blaspheme him with their lives.” As Lutherans balance Law and Gospel in their preaching, so Augustine balanced a dual figuration “full of peril and promise.” Harmless notes that Augustine’s very view of

things could indeed be too much “promise and peril.” Promise showed forth the clash of light and darkness in the human heart and human history; peril lurked in shadows drawn on human nature too darkly. He would warn antithetically, “See, you are Christians. You come to church regularly; you hear the Word of God; you are swept away by God’s word. [The assembly had been cheering.] You praise the teacher. I want your actions to match it.” (*Sermon 178.*)

The Metaphor: This style of teaching, Harmless notes, keeps one’s message close to the audience’s experience. Augustine would thread the religious theme into daily life, and give mundane daily life a glow of the divine. His examples could be startling and challenging: “The Lord’s prayer as a bilge pump, the Creed as a pact between pearl merchants, the Spirit as a hot southern wind.”

Grace’s final word

Finally, the academic Harmless is most charming and encouraging as he outlines Augustine’s three aims of teaching, delighting and motivating – and their egotistical shadow side: “ploys, play-acting, and the hard sell.” Lutherans can hear echoing concerns when confronted by evangelical techniques and programs bearing corporate-style processes: “church growth, total-quality ministry, and missional-church.”

Harmless warns that teaching, delighting and

motivating – without a teacher who himself is filled with delight, enthusiasm and passion – can be a “poor spokesperson for the awe-inspiring mercy and love of God . . . No hard and fast line can be drawn between the Christian message and the Christian who bears that message . . . The life of the speaker has a greater weight in persuading than the most eloquent speech.”

“In the end,” Harmless writes, “neither eloquent words nor eloquent lives have the final word. Grace does.” We frail teachers take our delight as readers in our Risen Lord. As Augustine put it:

*I persuade in one way; God, in another;
I, on the outside; God on the inside; . . .
I, by speaking; God without speech;
I, only through his gift; God, through his very self;
I, as a minister, who have this ministry from him;
God, as a crafter of ministers, who, though needing no minister, uses faithful ministers for this that he may lavish the good of his workings even on them;
finally, I, as a human being who, most of the time, cannot persuade much; God, as the one – when he so wills it – to whom the power of persuasion submits.
[Epistola 2]*

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Sin puts its feet up



In a piece in last month’s issue (“An Unexpected Journey”), I quoted Genesis 4.7, where God says to Cain, “sin is couching at the door.” My two most particular and eagle-eyed proofreaders both suggested that this should be “crouching”; to which I replied, “Depends on the translation. I’m quoting the *Revised Standard Version*, and it is definitely ‘couching.’” Check it out if you don’t believe me.

Truth is, there are a number of different translations offered for this particular phrase. The *New English Bible* actually has “crouching,” but I don’t know if that has a different connotation in British English. The *New Revised Standard Version*, perhaps to end the confusion between the two words,

uses “lurking.” The *Jerusalem Bible*, in what seems to me to be a bit overreaching, describes sin as being “at the door like a crouching beast hungering for you.” Some of the other “less literal” translations also take that tack. Maybe the translators have in mind 1 Peter 5.8, though there it is the Devil and not sin *per se* that seeketh whom he may devour.

Reading the commentaries

I’m no Hebrew scholar; far from it. From reading the commentaries, it appears to me that a case could be made for either “couching” or “crouching.” The latter, of course, suggests that crouching beast, ready to spring. But “couching” is suggestive of seduction: sin as seductress (I’ll put it

in the feminine, since Cain is the victim), lounging around the door in skimpy clothes trying to seduce the victim.

Either way works for me, because either way works against me. At least in my life, sometimes sin is a ferocious beast, and sometimes a seducing temptress. Both are dangerous, and really successful.

So I don't worry too much about the word used in translation here. I chalk it up to the wonderful ambiguity of Scriptural images that can allow us to read a text one way today, somewhat differently tomorrow, depending on what's happening in our souls at the moment.

Compelling image

What I really like about "couching," though, is another image entirely – probably not one the Biblical writer had in mind, but then, you know, images are fluid.

I find compelling the image of sin moving in and making itself at home, plopping itself down on

the couch and putting its feet up. That's how it often seems to me, maybe more often than either crouching lion or couching seductress. Just a mundane, ho-hum kind of reality that seems more or less harmless – annoying, perhaps, but ignorable. And yet once it's there, once it's made itself comfortable on your spiritual couch, getting it to move out is almost impossible. Pretty soon it takes over your whole house, even puts its stuff in your closet.

Maybe we need different images for different sins. Lust, now it couches like a seductress. Anger probably crouches, at least most of the time. But the other five deadlies – pride, greed, envy, gluttony and especially sloth – seems to me they more often "couch" in that other sense. They just casually lounge around, and before you know it, they've taken over. They're kind of like a brother-in-law who comes to visit for a few days and then just never manages to go home. It is not a pretty sight.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Bible of the Poor • The "Bible of the Poor" was a late medieval picture book used by mendicant friars to give common people catechetical instruction. ALPB is pleased to publish *Rich in Grace: The Bible of the Poor for 21st Century Christians*, which not only reproduces many of these block prints, but offers contemporary poetic reflections on each by Kathryn Ann Hill. You can order it at <www.alpb.org>.

St. Andrew Breviary • Eugen Andrew Lehrke publishes a yearly *St. Andrew Breviary*. It offers for each week a couple of prayers, a list of the daily readings and psalms, and a "reflection" on the week's theme. It's a helpful resource for those who would like to develop a practice of daily prayer. Contact Pr. Lehrke for more information at <preugen@msn.com>.

Luther 101 • That CBS special "In God's Name" was an interesting couple hours of television. We've heard a lot of comments about Bp. Mark Hanson's representing Lutherans as one of the "world religious leaders." Most seem to think he did a pretty good job, and for the most part, we're inclined to

agree. We were a bit taken aback by one comment: his statement (and we're quoting him directly, we've got it on tape) that "We believe very firmly that humanity is at the same time both saint and sinner." Leave aside that it would have made more grammatical sense, and still have duly bowed to the gods of political correctness, had he said human beings, rather than humanity, are simultaneously "saint and sinner." More puzzling, the way we remember it, "saint and sinner" was Luther's description of Christians, not human beings in general. Exercising the eighth commandment, we've been telling ourselves, "Well, it was one sentence, and it was presented as just that single sentence in a collage of other statements from other world religious leaders." But we admit, we're having a bit of trouble figuring out what he might have said before or after that one sentence that would have made it any truer to Luther's meaning, or to Lutheran theology.

God is me • "Stunning, on so many levels." That was the comment of one pastor concerning an event being sponsored by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod (though they've opened it to people from

some neighboring synods). "Wonderfully Made" is a weekend retreat for 15- to 17-year-olds "who are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/or questioning and who are interested in discussing and understanding sexuality alongside their own spirituality." This event will enable them "to share their stories and struggles to remain people of faith despite the negative message they frequently receive from much of Christianity." Oh, and they'll be able "to encounter the sacred as an integral part of themselves." That kind of says it all, doesn't it? When the sacred is located in ourselves, any talk about, oh, "captive to sin," for instance, is just so darn negative. But theological quibbles aside, it's still stunning: an ELCA synod officially sponsoring and promoting an event that teaches kids that their sexual struggles and confusions are just fine by God. They could at least wait until after the social statement on sexuality, couldn't they, so we'd know what we believe?

Unintended consequences • There are ELCA leaders and ecumenists who are increasingly concerned about the effect 2009 decisions on sexuality might have on our ecumenical relationships. Most of our full communion partners, of course, will not have a problem; the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ are already much farther down the road than we are when it comes to ordaining partnered gays and lesbians, and they would be happy to have us join them on that road. Not so sanguine are the Romans and Orthodox, who have sent quiet signals that they are very much concerned. They have long seen the ELCA as one of their most seri-

ous dialogue partners; and there is real danger that the ELCA's decisions about sexuality could significantly damage some promising future directions. Indeed, some of our dialogue partners are unhappy that we are even discussing the possibility of changing our policies in this area. That, unfortunately, is not likely to be a major factor in the ELCA's decision-making next year. But we may well find ourselves filing it under the category of "unintended consequences."

And then . . . • Some ELCA pastors are really, really wondering what on earth the Sexuality Task Force is thinking – not just about sex, but about dating. Well, about dates. They are planning to release the first draft of the social statement on sexuality on March 13 (rostered leaders can apparently get a 24-hour head start at some top secret website). March 13, hard to believe, is three days before Holy Week begins. A number of pastors are concerned that the headlines – whatever they may be – will be, shall we say, an unfortunate distraction from the proper focus for Christians during the most sacred time of the year. It leaves one wondering whether the people who make these decisions have any concept of what life in the parish is like. We recommend two actions to our ELCA readers: (1) It's probably too late, but send an e-mail to Chicago asking for a ten-day delay; (2) Have the self-discipline to ignore the report until after Easter. Don't ask, don't tell. If anyone brings it up, just say, quite honestly, "Haven't heard about it. Got more important things to do this week."

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