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Surrender to sheer grace



“Even when [faith] is taught in the best possible way, it is difficult enough to learn it well. . . . We cannot . . . think anything except that, if I have lived a holy life and done many great works, God will be gracious to me. . . . The heart is always ready to boast of itself before God and say: ‘After all, I have preached so long and lived so well and done so much, surely God will take this into account. . . .’ When you come before God, leave all that boasting at home and remember to appeal from justice to grace. But let anybody try this and he will see and experience how exceedingly hard and bitter a thing it is for someone who all his life has been mired in his work righteousness, to pull himself out of it and with all his heart rise up through faith. . . . I myself have now been preaching and cultivating it through reading and writing for almost 20 years and still I feel the old clinging dirt of wanting to deal so with God that I may contribute something, so that he will have to give me his grace in exchange for my holiness. Still I cannot get it into my head that I should surrender myself completely to sheer grace; yet this is what I should do and must do.” —Martin Luther, “On the Sum of the Christian Life” (*Luther’s Works*, American edition, vol. 51)

A new song to whom it may concern



My wife and my seminarian daughter recently joined me for the installation service of our new bishop. It happened to be my daughter’s birthday (you have to admire a daughter who will consent to spend her birthday attending such an event), so we went out for dinner afterward at our favorite Vietnamese restaurant. Of course as soon as we had ordered, the topic came up: “So what did you think of the service?”

I think it was my daughter who asked the question — understandable, since she’s spent the last year at Yale Divinity School as one of the students on the team planning worship at YDS’s Marquand Chapel. I like to tell friends of my approximate vintage that one of her predecessors was the blessed Paul Nelson, late Director of Worship for the ELCA, who died much too soon. I doubt Paul would recognize worship at Marquand now (or in a good bit of the ELCA, for that matter), but that’s another story.

Birthday didactic

Anyway, I decided to pass over the political dimensions of the question, and simply speak liturgically. “Didn’t much like it,” I groused. “Didn’t care for the music.” I went on to offer a little didactic session about what exactly was problematic with the music (yes, I know it was her birthday and all, but trust me,

she likes this kind of stuff). That didn't end it, at least in my mind, for I've been contemplating since then just what it is that bugs me about so many of the "new hymns" that seem endemic in Lutheran worship today, at least in the ELCA. I don't really mean to criticize this particular service, but to think of it as an example of something I find very troubling about contemporary liturgical trends.

Here I go, Lord

One issue is simply overuse of a handful of songs – not unique to the present age, to be sure. This liturgy's "gathering song" (that's what they called it in the bulletin; so much clearer and more contemporary, you know, than "processional hymn") was Marty Haugen's "Gather Us In," which I'm pretty sure, without having done a scientific survey, has been sung at every synod-sponsored worship service the past five years. I'm personally sick of it.

Twelve years ago or so I was on sabbatical for four months, and I attended worship at a different congregation each week. I alternated; one week it would be some neighboring ELCA congregation, the next it would be some church of another denomination in our community. I think during those four months I sang "Here I Am, Lord" in church six times. That one seems to be fading a bit now. Probably has something to do with the masculine name for God.

During the summer here at Peace, we do a brief "congregation's choice hymn sing" before each service. You can figure we'll sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "How Great Thou Art" and (for reasons I have yet to fathom) "Lord of the Dance" at least five or six times during the summer. Then I can get away without singing them during the rest of the year.

But it usually goes beyond overuse. So many of these "contemporary hymns" are really quite ephemeral. What I mean is that nobody will be singing them twenty years from now. They have no staying power. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" has lasted for centuries, and for many reasons beyond simply Lutheran fealty.

A good hymn has the potential to last that long because it incorporates the faith of the church and expresses it with grace and beauty. But so much of what enamors us today is not going to make it for

the long haul. When was the last time you sang "We Are One in the Spirit" or "Weave Us Together," those hits of the sixties and eighties respectively?

Graceless procession

The music is problematic too, not just the text. "Gather Us In" might work musically in an intimate setting where people are informally gathering. In a "cathedral church," full to capacity thirty minutes before the liturgy begins, and a liturgy beginning with a long procession of clergy – sorry, no. You can't process with any grace in 6/8 time, and there aren't enough verses to cover a long procession anyway. (Leave aside the fact that few Lutheran clergy can process gracefully in any event.)

But, as I opined to the women in my life, what bugs me most is the words. Virtually all the songs in the service were about us – ironic, since I'm sure they were chosen for their great "social justice" texts. But think about it: "Gather Us In" is at least nominally directed to God (I guess it's God; never really says, but I'll take it on faith). But most of the song goes on endlessly about how wonderfully diverse we are – the lost and forsaken, the blind and the lame, the young, the old, the rich and the haughty, the proud and the strong, on and on and on. It's about us, and how lucky God is to have such a diverse group.

Something to do with God

The rest of the songs weren't much different. William Whitla's "Let Streams of Living Water" at least had the good fortune of being sung to the majestic tune "Thaxted," but the words once more left me thirsty. Again presumably addressed to God (though that doesn't become a possibility until the second verse), this one's all about humanity. "Our faith we find in service, our hope in other's dreams, our love in hand of neighbor" – excuse me, but shouldn't faith, hope and love have something to do with Jesus, at least in a Christian liturgy?

Then there was John Bell's "Will You Come and Follow Me?" – a song I kind of like, actually, but again ask the question: to whom is it addressed? And the answer, with the exception of verse five, is that it is addressed to us. It is words put into the mouth of God (it seems), addressed to the congregation. Of course the words aren't actually the words of God, that is, they aren't the words of Scripture.

Just words we imagine God might say. So why again is the congregation singing it? Sort of seems like we're talking to ourselves, doesn't it?

Then came David Haas's "We Are Called" — and just from the title, you can see once again it is about us — about us, addressed to us, focused on us. Not to mention this was the recessional hymn, and it's in 3/4 time. Shall we waltz on out of here now?

In fairness, one of the communion distribution hymns was the classic "O Bread of Life from Heaven." Unfortunately, it didn't seem like too many there had ever sung this one before, even among the clergy.

Praising God

So here's a service of installation, which should be a great and festive time for the church, with a liturgy full of praise to God. Here's a packed church, including a couple of hundred clergy who, one would presume, have some acquaintance with the treasury of the church's song, and could sing lustily and with good courage. And what do we get? Songs about us — and songs for the most part written in the past thirty years. With the exception of "O Bread of Life," not one of the songs in this service even mentioned Jesus Christ (let's not even talk about the Holy Trinity!).

I suppose I should be grateful we didn't sing one of my personal favorites, sung during the Eucharist at a synod assembly a few years back: "There Must Be a God Somewhere."

I have nothing (well, almost nothing) against singing contemporary hymns in worship. That's part of the process, I know; we "try out" new compositions. Some of them work and they endure; most of them quickly fade away. But not everything is even worth a try. Worship is supposed to praise God. I would like the music of worship to praise God — and preferably, unequivocally and clearly, the God whom we Christians know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So much of what people want to sing today is really praising humanity.

But it's feel-good music, and that's why people want it, and why some pastors and congregations embrace it. It's the music of human potential. Or, if it does get around to God, it articulates Richard Niebuhr's famous God without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the work of a Christ without a cross.

Good singing not necessarily good liturgy

Of course every song doesn't have to be theologically perfect or complete — few are, truth be told. And in liturgical planning, what matters finally is how all the parts make up the whole. But this doesn't seem to be how pastors are trained these days. I heard several comments — and from pastors! — about what a "powerful" service this was, how "wonderful" the music had been. Sorry, I can't agree. People sang pretty well, I'll give you that. But then they don't do so badly with the Star-Spangled Banner at a baseball game, either.

My wife asked a question at dinner that night. "Why," said she, "do you think other pastors don't seem to care about these things?" (meaning the various reasons I had offered for my discontent with the music). I had no answer, and still don't. Perhaps it can be blamed on the liturgical and musical training offered (or not offered) in our seminaries. Maybe it is the increased number of seminary students who are relatively new to the faith, and who consequently don't have much "church" in their backgrounds or in their genes.

It's more than just music

I suppose, when you think about it, the problem isn't restricted to the question of liturgy and music. There's a lot of theological training going on today that eschews the classic theologians in favor of "developing one's own theology" — often another way of saying, "Forget about St. Augustine; how do *you* think about God?" And God knows there's a tendency in Biblical studies, at least in some of our seminaries, to suggest that exegesis can and should be "contextualized" apart from the tradition of the church. After all, earlier Christian generations didn't have the benefit of our advanced wisdom and knowledge. "What seems good to the Holy Spirit" today pretty much boils down to "what seems good to us."

I do know sitting in that service made me realize I couldn't possibly think of taking another call, at least not in my present synod (not that I've really ever contemplated such a thing). No congregation would be happy with me, and I wouldn't be happy with them. Our views of worship and music would be just too different.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

What kind of pastor?



At a recent circuit function our circuit counselor was commenting on the high number of vacancies and impending vacancies in our area and nationwide. He explained how the congregations request names from the district president, and the district president jokes that they are all the same. "We're looking for someone young and energetic, a dynamic preacher and teacher, someone who will appeal to the youth and be outreach-oriented, a self-motivated organizer with a heart for God's people, someone with leadership qualities and a servant's heart," etc.

I guess that's probably true. I doubt the district president gets too many requests along the lines of "we want an introverted bookworm of advancing years, socially awkward but not tech-savvy, an academically gifted theologian, a real gem once you get to know him, but one who finds praying in the sacristy more important than working the crowd in the narthex."

What kind of shepherd?

If you ask people what kind of shepherd they especially would want for themselves, their answer might focus more on "gentle and wise, grounded in God's Word, lots of experience, a deep thinker with the ability to apply theology to life," which might fit the gray-bearded bookworm better than the young dynamo. But we're conditioned to make our call decisions not as sheep needing a shepherd, but as an institutional flock, the congregation as organized entity seeking long term health and viability in terms of attendance and finances. The pastor I would want doing a loved one's funeral is not necessarily the one who can create a buzz and generate visitors to the congregation.

Which is a shame. Everything on the call document – everything a pastor is supposed to do – is something one ought to get better at with age. But everything the people want their pastor to be and do, one usually gets worse at with age. Maybe it has always been that way.

An issue of trust

Amid all the talk of the many vacancies and how long it would take to fill them came the topic of

the 35 seminary grads who did not receive calls right away this spring (who, I believe, by this time have all been placed). We constantly talk of a clergy shortage, and yet we often have a crop of perfectly willing and able, trained and certified candidates with nowhere to go, at least not right away. What is the deal? I don't believe for a moment that it is nothing more than the same old desire of congregations for a certain demographic and personality type being unmet by the grads. These are fresh grads; even if many of them are second career guys, they've got to be younger on average than the guys in the field.

Nor do I think the issue is that the vacant congregations can't afford a full-time pastor. The vacancies and impending vacancies in our circuit are all in perfectly viable congregations near the nation's cultural center of gravity – Green Bay, Wisconsin. Nor do I think it is just the old paradox that everyone wants a young pastor, but with decades of experience. I think the issue is one of trust, and one of divergent understandings of just what a pastor is.

Horror stories

A couple of horror stories. A group of regular old Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod folks find themselves in a new bedroom community far from any established LCMS congregation. They form a group to start a mission church, and call (via the district) a fresh seminary graduate to be their missionary-at-large to lead the new start-up congregation. This young dynamo arrives and informs them that there is no future in regular old Lutheran congregations and that instead of doing Word and Sacrament ministry in their midst, he will be starting a daycare center to serve as a launching pad for a future contemporary church, and they are free to get on board with that vision or go elsewhere. Odds of those people (wherever they ended up) calling another candidate from the seminary? Nil.

Another young pastor arrives in an established congregation and immediately informs the elders that their services will no longer be required during communion as he will handle the distribution (including to himself) all by himself, since all should receive the elements from the hands of Christ, i.e., the pastor as the icon of Christ. He also

unilaterally discontinues the use of individual cups in favor of the chalice. When the church governance votes to reinstate the individual cups and the elders assisting with communion, this pastor overrules them on the grounds that these decisions of his are a matter of conscience or doctrine and therefore not subject to a vote. Odds of this congregation calling another guy out of the seminary? Nil.

All over the map

OK, so those are extreme examples, and simplified for the sake of emphasis. But the point is that no longer can a congregation assume that any given pastor will be suitable for their purposes because no longer can we assume that all congregations and pastors have the same basic idea of what a pastor is and does. If the requests for pastors all sound the same ("young, energetic") concerning the demographic profile, they're getting to where they don't even sound vaguely similar in terms of what it is we want them to do so youthfully and energetically. We're all over the map with our different visions for our congregation and so we each have to find just the right pastor/leader.

And I'm not talking about common sense issues like finding a comfortable cultural fit between pastor and congregation in terms of urban or rural, ethnic or geographical considerations. I'm talking about the fundamental role and job description of a pastor and the general culture and routine of a congregation.

Mail order pastors

So the process of assigning candidates gets more and more precise and focused. We get more interviews with more questions to make sure we're getting someone who wants to lead us where we want to go. Gone is the idea that you can just send away for a pastor and hope for an especially good one, or at least not a dud. Gone (or going away rapidly) is the idea that the candidate walks across the chancel on call night with no idea where he is being sent, as I did only ten years ago. ("Call night," for our non-LCMS readers, is the ritual where graduating seminarians are, or at least used to be, assigned to their first calls.) Gone is the sense of cohesive identity that leads to unity and trust throughout the synod. This trend of divergent visions has to change.

If you think your church is unified, ask your-

self this—how nervous would you be to get your next pastor via random drawing from the clergy roster? It doesn't have to be the LCMS; the test would work for the ELCA, too, or any denomination. I theorize that people in a unified synod would be moderately anxious, of course, hoping to get a pastor they like. But they could live with such a system. But people in a divided synod would be incredibly anxious, as though the whole future of the congregation hinged on the outcome of the drawing. Either that or they would not be anxious at all, since they would simply transfer somewhere else if they didn't get the pastor (and "vision") they were hoping for.

Sniffing around

Unfortunately, the only way to rebuild unity and trust is to act like you have more of it than you really have. Over the summer my associate pastor received a call to another congregation. He hadn't been looking for a call, but unfortunately he's young, energetic, a dynamic preacher and teacher, and he's been here for four years, so other congregations naturally came sniffing around. As it happens, he declined the call and stayed on with us.

But the prospect of having to find another pastor made me ask myself: could we request a candidate from the seminary without doing a bunch of interviews? That's what I think would happen in a healthy church body. Could we as a congregation trust that when we request a certified LCMS pastor, the people doing the certifying have basically the same thing in mind as we do? Or if not, can we act as if we do? The choice would be entirely ours.

If we decided the risks were too high simply to request a candidate, we'd be watching out for our congregation but contributing to the disunity of synod. If we decided to risk it, well, who knows what we might get? It's a tough call. Could we bring ourselves to accommodate whatever idiosyncrasies or ideas he might bring with him, trusting that he'll also accommodate himself to our history and way of doing things here, both of us knowing that the differences can't be that great, and might benefit both new pastor and congregation in unexpected ways? It sounds easier than it is. I don't know what we'd have done. But it seems to me the question really amounts to this: are we a synod?

—by Peter Speckard, associate editor

The family monastery

By Pr. Brad Everett



When asked what was the difference between a monk and a married man, St. John Chrysostom replied, “The married man has a wife.” I don’t think any violence would be done to this sentiment if the terms “nun” and “married woman” were inserted instead.

Think about that for a minute – not in terms of the obvious difference between the two states of life, but what it says about those things they have in common. The monastic ideal conjures up images of a life set apart for simplicity, prayer, work, service to others and above all service to Christ, which, if Chrysostom’s statement is correct, should be said about families as well. But truth be told, those likely aren’t the first things that come to mind when talking about families these days – even Christian families.

But why not? Why shouldn’t our families and homes be places of prayer and work, simplicity and service? Some might say that comparing monastic and family life I am comparing apples to oranges; besides, Chrysostom was an unmarried bishop in the fourth century, so what does he know about North American family life in 2008?

No one told us

A reading of his book *On Marriage and Family Life* (a collection of his sermons and letters on the topic) shows the good bishop did understand families and demonstrates again that “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Of course there are differences between then and now, monasteries and family homes, but the question remains – why shouldn’t our families and homes be places of prayer and work, simplicity and service?

Picking from the variety of answers to that question, I’d choose this one: No one told us our families and homes could be like that, or that it was within our power, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to do it. Overwhelmed by stresses, strains and societal pressures, our judgment was sufficiently clouded to prevent us from seeing this very real possibility.

While certainly much in our lives is beyond our control, we lost sight of those things we do have within our grasp – for example, our schedules. Life

in a monastery is built around prayer – i.e., the times for prayer are established first and then the rest of the day’s activities are slotted in around those times. Many of us, unintentionally or otherwise, do the exact opposite. Appointments and activities get first priority in the schedule and prayer is slotted in afterwards (or not at all).

Yet there is nothing stopping us from reversing this process – from sitting down with a day-timer or calendar and establishing times and opportunities for family prayer, and letting the rest of life fit in around them.

Fair warning – this is hard and for the most part thankless work. We live in a world where one’s value is measured by what and how much one “does.” Prayer and devotions are not understood to be “doing” much of anything, and so are not valued. But we need to remind ourselves that the world around us is not the final arbiter of what is important and necessary for our lives. Our time as individuals and families in this life is finite. We need to set prayerfully our own priorities for how to spend it, rather than allowing someone or something else to do it. We find time for those things most important to us. So before claiming a shortage of time, we might want to see if our practice reflects our priorities.

Removing the obstacles

Having set aside time for prayer, our next question is often, “What do we do?” In monasteries this is an easy one since services of prayer have developed over the centuries and are simply followed as a matter of course. But things like praying all 150 psalms each week isn’t a realistic option for most individuals, let alone households with preschoolers. Unfortunately this is where many homes get hung up – obstacles block their view of the options.

So instead of being intimidated by what you can’t do, look at what you can. As a first step, take a look at your home, the personalities, gifts, inclinations and, of course, the ages of the people that make it up. There are resources to help. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* has orders for the daily prayer offices, with notes on how to modify them for family use.

This might not be for everyone, but don't dismiss it out of hand. At the very least, it's a place to begin. It gives a framework families can adapt to their situations. For those starting out, it will be trial and error – but that's half the fun, because you are doing it as a family.

One family's way

Further, the times of prayer and practices of devotion a family develops are not necessarily all formal. By way of example (and not the best example by any stretch), here are some things our family has done. At every meal we hold hands and pray grace in unison. It doesn't matter who is here or how old they are, the practice is the same. Before bedtime we gather at the kitchen table, light the candle in our Camp Kuriakos lantern and read a story from a children's Bible. Now that the older two kids are reading, we share this duty. We then sing a song of their choosing, usually "God Our Protector" or during Advent/Christmas "Angels We Have Heard on High."

Prayer follows. Sometimes everyone takes a turn, or requests are shared and I'll pray. The time ends with the blowing out of the candle (or candles, if it is Advent) and heading off to bed, where we pray before tucking children in. Sometimes we sing the *Nunc dimittis* from the service of compline ("Guide us waking O Lord, and guard us sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace. Lord, now you let your servant go in peace . . ."). Yes, our children can sing compline, much like they can sing most of the Sunday liturgy. Kids pick up things much more quickly than adults; it's just a matter of them hearing it regularly.

At the bedside we pray the same prayer every night. "Dear Jesus, thank you for today and for all the fun that Christopher, Maren, Bennett and

Abbey had. Give them good night sleeps and happy dreams. Help them be all warm and snuggly and sleep all the night through. Help them to know how much you love them and how much mommy and daddy love them. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Oodles of blessings

We conclude with kisses and making the sign of the cross on their foreheads. We have blessed our children in this manner from the time each was born. As each child grows older, they do the same for their mom and me. And such blessings aren't restricted to bedtime. Blessings are exchanged when one is going on a trip or staying overnight somewhere else. When guests leave our home, or we leave a home where we have been guests, our kids will regularly give blessings, something they started doing of their own accord.

These are some of our family's practices. Some were intentional and others not, but the goal behind it all was to make the home a place of prayer. Or at the very least, a place where prayer could happen, trusting that the other points of work, simplicity and service would grow out of the practice of prayer. We are not where we want to be in our family prayer life, because there is always room for growth. But we know there is the possibility and promise.

Pr. Brad Everett, STS, lives in Standard, AB with his wife Manny and children Christopher (9), Maren (7), Bennett (4) and Abbey (1) and a large orange cat named Jens. He has served Nazareth Lutheran for over 7 years. This piece first appeared in The Forum, a publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's Synod of Alberta and the Territories, and is reprinted with permission.

Omnium gatherum



Pastoral care • After we had already completed last month's issue with its article on Lutheran response to the same-sex marriage ruling in California, we did hear from the office of Larry Stoterau, president of the LCMS's Pacific Southwestern District which includes Southern

California. Dr. Stoterau didn't send a special pastoral letter, but included some words of pastoral counsel in the district newsletter. It was quite different from the ELCA bishops' approach, acknowledging the pastoral difficulty of the issue and yet reminding of the need to proclaim both law and gospel. One sug-

gestion initially took me by surprise, but in the end I came to think was a good one: "I encourage you not to make this a topic of a sermon." He went on to argue that the issue should certainly be dealt with openly, but better to do it in a forum or class setting where people can actually discuss, ask questions, and think together, rather than in a sermon where there is "no opportunity for dialogue." Sounds like another bishop with some good pastoral sense.

A good example • Pr. Brad Everett, whose piece "The Family Monastery" appears elsewhere in this issue, is the editor of *The Forum* (nice name, huh?), the publication of the Communications Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's Synod of Alberta and the Territories. It is another fine example of a synodical publication that goes beyond the usual public relations and announcement junk and offers some substantive conversation about issues in church and world. You can sample it further at www.albertasynod.ca/publications/forum.

Bottum's up • There's a good deal of buzz going around some circles about an article in the August/September issue of *First Things*, that always provocative journal whose editor-in-chief is Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, formerly Lutheran and formerly editor of this publication. The piece is "The Death of Protestant America: A Political Theory of the Protestant Mainline," by *First Things* editor Joseph Bottum. It's well worth reading and contemplating, and *First Things* has generously posted it for your free perusal

on their website, www.firstthings.com. But while you're there, you really should consider subscribing; *First Things* offers, in my opinion, some of the weightiest discussion around on religion, culture, and public life.

To a bunch of gods • A recent issue of *Thrivent Magazine* featured Peace Lutheran Church in Danville, CA, which has created a mural on an outside wall dedicated to interfaith harmony. It features symbols of various religions, and includes a centerpiece that can be changed to honor whichever religion is celebrating a festival at a given time. Interfaith harmony is a good thing, but one has to wonder about the message of a mural on a Christian church that can take down a cross and substitute some other symbol of some other faith. At least the thing isn't in the sanctuary. Still, it reminds one of increasing numbers of hospital or college chapels that have bought into interfaith diversity of the "don't offend anyone by your particularity" type. Whatever happened to "lift high the cross"?

Free lunch • For quite a while now, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau has offered a one-year complimentary Forum Package subscription (as in "free") to new seminary graduates. Notification of this was inadvertently omitted this year. If you are, or if you know of, a 2008 seminary grad who would like to sample *Forum Letter* and *Lutheran Forum*, drop a note to the ever-gracious Donna Roche at Dkralpb@aol.com, and she'll likely be very happy to provide this gift.

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