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Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson
<roj@nccn.net>

Associate Editor: Pr. Peter Speckhard
<pspeckhard@hotmail.com>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 1394,
Grass Valley, CA 95945. <roj@nccn.net>

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Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327,
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A simple, faithful witness to the Word



“[T]he harmony of these clear Bible passages which children learn by heart is the rule of faith and the rule of scriptural interpretation. By these, the clear passages, everything obscure is to be illuminated. It would be to doubt the truthfulness of God to claim that the bright stars of the rule of faith . . . could not overcome the darkness hidden in remote recesses of the Scriptures which are not understood. The Scriptures have always demonstrated their own clarity. . . . It is a certainty that all the obscurities which men allege to be in the Scriptures are not really sunspots in the heaven of the Scriptures but are spots in the hearts of men and in their own eyes. All the misunderstandings of the divine Word with which men try to disguise that most dreadful lie that the Spirit of the Lord has not spoken clearly and plainly—these all have their origin in the blindness and evil nature of men. The same thing is true of the Word as is true of the Lord from which it comes: ‘To the pious it is pious; to the holy, holy; to the pure, pure; to those who gladly come to the light, it is light and leads to an illuminated church which lives in its light and warmth. But to the perverse it is perverse, and to the children of darkness who depart from the church it is nothing but darkness.’ But praise be [to] the Father who is the living source and in whose light we see light!” —Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books About the Church* (tr. James L. Schaaf, Fortress Press, 1969)

God’s “no” and God’s “yes”



Even after all these years, Martin Luther has the ability to blow me away. This summer the Revised Common Lectionary served up Matthew’s story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman—one on which I do my best to avoid preaching, but you can’t do that forever. Some years ago, I happened upon Luther’s sermon on this text in the Church Postil (always good reading!), and it changed forever how I hear this strange story. This Reformation issue seems an apt place to share Luther’s insight.

Most modern commentators make much of the fact that this woman is a Gentile, a Canaanite, and they therefore tend to view the story as having to do with Jesus preaching the gospel beyond the limits of Israel. No surprise there; inclusivity is one of the dogmatic tenets *de jour*, after all. But Luther takes a different direction. The story for him is not about how inclusive Jesus was, or how quick he was to embrace someone “different.” Rather it is about faith, and it is especially about how Christ helps us grow in our faith. He freely acknowledges that Jesus in this passage comes off as unfeeling and harsh—yet in Luther’s view, the purpose is to provoke faith. “See how Christ like a hunter exercises

and chases faith in his followers in order that it may become strong and firm."

Starting with the woman

So we start with the woman—and for Luther, she represents you and me. Her being a Canaanite means that she is a foreigner who has no right even to talk to Jesus. And in that, he says, she is like us. We are so far from God, so separated by sin. That is a constant refrain in Christianity—from Isaiah's lament: "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips!"—to John Newton: "Amazing grace, that saved a wretch like me."

That kind of talk isn't so popular today; we're more inclined to self-esteem and positive self image, and we don't want to think of ourselves as having anything fundamentally wrong with us. But for Luther, that is the starting point. If I do not understand how far I am from God, how little I am compared to God, how unworthy I am even to come into God's presence, then nothing else about Christianity can make sense. And so this story teaches us, first of all, to acknowledge that we have no claim on God whatsoever by virtue of ourselves. We are foreign to him. He is holy; we are sinners.

The hidden God

Then Luther looks at the unfolding of the woman's experience with Christ. When she first cries out to him, what is his response? It is silence! He doesn't seem even to acknowledge her. For Luther, this gets to the heart of the great mystery of the hiddenness of God. God doesn't always respond in the way we think he should. Often God is silent. "God appears so earnest and angry," he writes, "and he conceals his grace so high and deep."

I know that experience, and so do you. I have sometimes besought God, and found him silent. I have looked for light, and found only darkness. You, too, have no doubt wondered, at one time or another, "Where is God? Why is he silent?" Tragedy, illness, death, suffering, public or very private pain—the question is always the same, it seems: Why is God silent?

But when confronted with silence, this woman of faith simply keeps seeking Jesus. She believes that he will be there for her; and because she believes it, trusts it, counts on it, she is not deterred

by silence. She keeps seeking.

Jesus' harsh words

Then the disciples get into the act. "Send her away, she keeps shouting after us." The English translation here misleads us a bit, for it sounds as if they simply want to get rid of her. Actually we could read that more positively. "Send her away," could also mean, "Satisfy her by giving her what she wants," and Luther reads it that way. Other people, he says, are coming to her defense. They entreat Christ to help her. But he rebuffs them as well. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Harsh words. Sometimes we imagine, Luther says, that we hear those words, too. Sometimes it seems to us that God's promises are only for other people, not for us.

I think more of us suffer from this idea than one might sometimes think. It makes itself known in the heart which is never quite sure of God's forgiveness. "I have confessed my sin," someone says to me, "but I still feel the guilt." What is that if not a fear that God's mercy and love is for others, but not me?

Clinging to the Word

And yet this woman's response is something remarkable. She comes and throws herself at Jesus' feet and asks for help. She will not accept the idea that there is no mercy for her—even when it seems that Jesus himself has said so! Still she believes. She is like Job: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him!" She will not listen to any voice that tells her it is not meant for her. "She does not give up," says Luther, "she clings to the Word although it be torn out of her heart by force, is not turned away by this stern answer, still firmly believes his goodness is yet concealed in that answer, and still she will not consider that Christ is or may be ungracious. That is persevering steadfastness."

But then comes the crushing blow. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus says. "If Christ had spoken such words to me," Luther admits, "I would have turned and left him, thinking it useless to ask him any more, since he seems determined not to grant the request." Oh, I hear that! It is like the crowning blow to this poor woman. Who can still believe in his goodness after being called a dog?

But she does. “Faith takes hold of Christ’s words, even when they sound harsh, and changes them into soothing expressions of consolation.” “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Luther sees in this the ultimate faith. It is saying to Christ, “Yes, I know I am unworthy. I know I have sinned. I know I have no right. But you have come to save sinners, and so you have come to save me.” It is taking the harsh judgment: “You are a sinner!” – and hearing it as a word of grace: “Because you are a sinner, Christ is for you.”

Humble access

Sometimes words of old prayers from the communion service of my childhood come into my mind – a good argument, I think, for liturgical worship, and for memorizing important texts. I remember what Methodists used to call the prayer of humble access (Wesley borrowed it from the *Book of Common Prayer*). “We do not presume to come to this, thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. . . .” Isn’t that what this is about? Isn’t it about knowing that we are unworthy, yet coming in confidence because we know the bottom line isn’t our deserving but his forgiving? Isn’t that what we know, every time we come to the Eucharistic table – that we don’t really deserve this gift, but that is exactly why Christ gives it to us, why he gives himself to us? It is grace, not

reward.

“All this,” Luther says, “is written for our comfort and instruction, that we may know how deeply God conceals his grace before our face, and that we may not estimate him according to our feelings and thinking, but strictly according to his word.” The key here, Luther says, the key to this seeming reluctance of Jesus to grant the woman her request, is to recognize that “all his answers indeed sound like ‘no,’ but they are not ‘no’; they remain . . . pending. . . . All those trials of her faith sounded more like ‘no’ than ‘yes’; but there was more ‘yes’ in them than ‘no’; indeed, there is only ‘yes’ in them, but it is very deep and very concealed, while there appears to be nothing but ‘no.’”

Struggling with God’s “no”

That popular meditation called “Prayer of an Unknown Confederate Soldier” (who cares where it actually comes from?) closes with these words: “I got nothing that I asked for but everything I had hoped for.” Sometimes God’s “yes” is deeply concealed behind God’s “no,” but it is always there.

And so this gospel text, which Luther calls “a precious Gospel,” is about faith – and about how sometimes God hides his “yes” behind a “no” precisely so that we might grow in faith and trust. When we struggle with what seems like “no,” this wonderful and faithful Canaanite woman bears her witness to us: Do not be turned away until that “no” blossoms into a beautiful and resounding “yes.”

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Retrieving confessional identity – for the public good

by Mark Mattes



For decades, noted evangelical historian Mark Noll has told Lutherans that their greatest contribution to North American ethos and culture would be to claim their own unique identity, rather than fitting into either prevailing mainline Protestantism (what Richard John Neuhaus has called the “old-line” or “sideline”) or born-again evangelicalism. In spite of that challenge, the ELCA continues its drift into mainline liberalism while some groups in the LCMS mimic born-again Christianity. If Noll is right, one wonders why Lu-

therans would conform to directions in other denominations rather than contribute their own uniqueness in the North American context.

Past confessional identity

In the not-so-distant past most Lutheran synods in North America understood themselves to be confessional – that is, they saw their identity primarily to be based on proclamation of the gospel as promise. Their criteria for fidelity to this promise were to be found in the scriptures and the Lutheran

confessions. They differed from Christians who re-conceived the gospel as a political agenda to attain utopia, or an ethic to give voice to the voiceless, or a psychological quest for feeling good about oneself, or a metaphysical description locating God in the actual map of reality.

Certainly good psychological health, a concern to help the economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized, and a sense of how religion squares with science are important. But they need to be interpreted through the lens of law and gospel, not vice versa, if we are to be true to our confessional identity and to Scripture.

The rise of generic Lutheranism

The confessional identity of a bygone era was achieved through hard and diligent work. In colonial North America, Lutheranism was markedly similar to other Protestant groups, except its ethnicity was not Anglo-Saxon.

Several factors help explain such generic Lutheranism: (1) Halle Pietism embodied in the Muhlenburg tradition; (2) so-called "unionism" between German-speaking Lutheran and Reformed groups; (3) rationalism as represented in Frederick Henry Quitman's New York Synod; and (4) revivalism adopted by S. S. Schmucker and others. All these things helped to characterize Lutheranism as simply another Protestant denomination, with interests and methods parallel to those of the dominant Anglo-Saxon churches.

19th century renewal

Confessional renewal, both in Europe and America, was to alter the fabric of Lutheran identity. The impetus for this movement was manifold, but some manifestations of it stand out: (1) Claus Harms' anti-rationalist polemic voiced at the three hundredth anniversary of the Reformation (1817); (2) the liturgical and missionary endeavors of the Bavarian pastor Wilhelm Löhe; (3) a renewed appreciation for Luther and confessional theology in the Erlangen Theological Faculty; (4) the indefatigable labors of Charles Porterfield Krauth and others who helped establish the Mt. Airy Seminary and the General Council; (5) the spiritual and confessional awakening under Gisle Johnson at the Theological Faculty in Christiania (Oslo); and (6) the insistence on the bound will and the proper distinction between

law and gospel in the polemical witness of C. F. W. Walther.

These factors all shaped a strong confessional identity among Lutherans in North America and helped recover Luther's insight that the gospel is distinctively a promise, not an ethical directive, a metaphysical description, or a psychological dynamic.

How did it change?

Well into the 1960s most Lutheran synods continued to remain strong in confessional identity, and, like most Christian denominations at that time, enjoyed growth commensurate with the growth of the general population. Why did those synods which eventually merged into the ELCA weaken this identity? How did pastoral care as unconditional positive regard or Christian ethics as an indiscriminate and naïve preferential option for the poor supplant the primary witness of the gospel as sheer promise?

While there were many factors, one major reason for such changes was a desire to fit in or accommodate to facets of American public life. Lutheran leaders in the 1950s and 1960s felt that the future of the church depended on freeing it from its isolationist theological and ethnic ghetto. Lutheranism needed to give up its parochial identity if it was to stand a chance in an increasingly college-educated American culture. Our leaders thus became convinced that the Lutheran churches needed to embrace the academic trends apparent in the Society for Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion.

Values choice

Those trends are rooted in an apologetic for religion in the "public square" which allows for the unencumbered individual to choose one's own destiny and values. This humanistic approach affirms the human potential for self-exploration free of shame, the need for the underprivileged to attain self-development by the establishing of social equity, and a defense of the reality of God within a scientific/technological worldview. Slowly Lutheran theological faculties and college religion departments began to mirror these ideals.

As it moved into the mainline, Lutheranism tried to have it both ways. On the one hand, it em-

braced the humanistic endeavors of the academic camp (e.g., liberation theology, therapy, and science and religion), but it also latched on to the ecumenical movement as a defense of Christianity against rising secularism. Slowly, theological faculties and college religion departments reflected these apologetic trends. The alternative path—challenging secularism from the perspective of confessional identity—was seldom taken.

This attempt to defend the faith resulted in a secularizing of the faith. Today's ELCA has become a church with a very weak confessional identity, far more like that of the General Synod of the 1820s than the more robust confessionalism contributed by the General Council and the United Synod of the South to the United Lutheran Church at its 1918 formation.

Political salvation

The irony is that such accommodation actually marginalizes Lutheranism's impact on public life. Lutheranism's best witness would be to unmask the religious ideals embedded in a secular approach to politics. In the current humanistic approach, politics itself becomes salvific. Get the politics right and you'll have heaven on earth.

Both mainline and evangelical Protestantism fall into this trap; both are indebted to the Enlightenment's bifurcation of private faith (subjective experience) and public life (political utopianism). For both conservative and liberal wings of American religion—descendants of Charles Grandison Finney and William Ellery Channing respectively—inner transformation is highly valued. Born-again Christians have an experience in which Jesus is accepted as Savior, granting psychological wholeness. Mainline Protestants likewise profess Christ as Savior but in a more sophisticated, nuanced or symbolic way, in which Christ for Christians would help one be in touch with one's ultimate concern.

Similarly, with respect to public life, both brands of American Christianity are unabashedly millennialist. For born-again Christians, when "family values" are honored and government interference with the economy stops, then there will be heaven on earth. For mainline Protestants, when society tolerates individual lifestyles and when wealth is transferred to those on the economic margins, then there will be heaven on earth.

Amillennial Lutherans

In contrast, confessional Lutherans are amillennialists, wise to the fact that we are saved not by inner transformation but by an external word. They also know that politics is remedial, addressing a fallen world; millennial utopianism is an illusion. Neither experience nor politics can save, and, in a sense, our salvation delivers us *from* both these things. Government at its best can only curb sin, not cure it. Prior to Christ's return, politics will remain forever messy.

Lutheranism can offer public life its best when it presents an alternative to both born-again and mainline religion. With social conservatives, Lutherans are apt to affirm the sanctity of life and traditional views of marriage. But with social liberals, they are apt to combat an unfair economic system in which the poor and weak need defense and remediation. A confessional Lutheran view thus defies current partisan politics.

What Lutherans can contribute

Indeed, Noll is right. Lutherans could contribute the most to public life by arguing that the public is not able to save itself, that government exists for the well-being of the neighbor, and that utopian enthusiasm is itself a disease. We should eschew the illusions of utopia, whether of the left or of the right. Instead, Lutherans acknowledge that God works in public life even when the public is unaware of it. We seek the well-being of the unborn, of children, and all those who are poor and disadvantaged.

But even more important than a non-utopian social ethic, Lutherans could offer the American public the insight of the gospel as promise—not to be transformed into ethical directives, metaphysical descriptions or psychological dynamics. The promise that Christ himself forgives sinners would offer North America a life-saving alternative to the usual religious fare in the contemporary milieu.

We were wrong

To do that, we'd have to admit that the weakening of confessional identity decades ago was wrong, leaving us unable to separate the content of the gospel from the cultural packages in which it is wrapped. We offer the most to the world when we embrace a robust confessional identity. And we offer

an educated laity the best when we offer them the truth—the proper distinction between law and gospel, between God’s left and right hand work—rather than the humanism into which we have channeled our energies.

Reclaiming confessional identity within the ELCA is clearly an uphill battle, but it is worth it. As one young pastor put it, “I didn’t realize there was a gospel other than the social gospel, but once I did, I’ve become far more passionate about ministry.” It’s time for the ELCA to reassess its situation and to

consider change—change on the basis of honoring the distinction between law and gospel and proclaiming the gospel as promise.

Mark Mattes is professor of philosophy and religion and chairs those departments at Grand View College, Des Moines, IA, a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He is the author of The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology (Eerdmans, 2004), and helps edit articles for Logia and Lutheran Quarterly. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Some festivals lesser than others



I know I get just a tad behind on these things, but that’s life. I have just learned about another casualty in the *ELW/LBW*

war: most lesser festivals.

This came to my attention when I was getting ready to celebrate St. Bartholomew’s day (we crypto-Catholics have felt a fondness for that particular saint’s day since 1572). For years now my parish has subscribed to the “lesser festivals track” of the Augsburg bulletin service. But here, looking at the bulletin cover, I found that August 24 was only the 15th Sunday after Pentecost—not a mention of St. Bartholomew anywhere, even in the fine print.

I inquired about this and received a prompt reply from Augsburg/Fortress. The staff person told me that the ELCA worship staff had developed a “hierarchy of lesser festivals.” She referred me to page 12 of the *ELW Leaders Desk Edition*, where the term “hierarchy” is not used (would you expect it to be?), but the principles are sort of described. Some of the lesser festivals (Name of Jesus, Presentation, Reformation, All Saints) always take precedence over the regular Sunday when they fall on Sunday. Others “may be observed on Sunday” when they fall on Sunday (John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, Mary, Holy Cross, Michael and All Angels).

Saintly value judgments

The rest are out of luck, though a congregation “may consider whether observing a lesser festival . . . other than those named above outweighs the value of observing the Sunday with its propers.” “The festival of St. Bartholomew,” the staffer wrote,

“does not take precedent (*sic*) over the Sunday that it falls on (August 24th) according to the *ELW* hierarchy.” OK then.

Truth be told, *ELW* seems to have backed off a bit on the original proposal about lesser festivals. “May be observed” is a lot less discouraging than the phrase that followed it in the *Renewing Worship* book *The Church’s Year*, which overtly “recommended that the propers for the Sunday be retained.” Score one for the lesser festival fans.

Incoherent hierarchy

Two things wrong with this, that I can see. First of all, what coherent reason can there be for this “hierarchy of lesser festivals”? Realistically, I suppose, we’ve always had some kind of hierarchy; even the lowest of low church Lutheran congregations probably celebrates Reformation and All Saints, even if that’s the only break in the green throughout the year. But how is John the Baptist worthier of recognition than, say, Matthew or Luke? It would have made more sense, seems to me, to eliminate the saints’ days entirely as “lesser festivals.” Treat them as commemorations, so that Peter and Paul, for instance, are on a par with Justin Martyr or Augustine. I’m not saying I like that idea, just that it would make more sense than a “hierarchy of lesser festivals.”

And then one must wonder how this odd decision got translated into production decisions at Augsburg Fortress. If they are marketing a “lesser festivals track” of bulletin covers, shouldn’t they actually give us all the lesser festivals? Otherwise call

it the “some of the lesser festivals track.” Next year, their staff person observes, there will be *no* lesser festival bulletins except Reformation and All Saints. So if your congregation really likes the lesser festivals as a way of occasionally visualizing the communion of saints, you’ll have to celebrate them without benefit of bulletin covers.

A compromise would have been in order here, seems to me. Let the bulletin cover say “15th Sunday after Pentecost” in big letters with “St. Bartholomew, Apostle” in smaller print. If there’s no room to print out the lections, at least list the citations as an alternative for the day. Eliminate or edit the seldom interesting little “blurb” about the theme of the Sunday and put something on the back of the bulletin cover about St. Bartholomew. Do something, anything, to acknowledge the lesser festival in this “lesser festival track” bulletin subscription.

Ecumenical logic

Now I know most other traditions that pay attention to these things generally don’t let a lesser festival take the place of a Sunday. There’s some logic to that, and I could accept it on ecumenical grounds. Every church body has its reasons for deviating from the norm when it comes to celebrating or observing special days. I don’t expect Episcopalians

or Roman Catholics to start celebrating Reformation Day any time soon, just for the sake of ecumenical consistency. Nor do I advocate Lutherans dropping the feast, or adding, say, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ as an annual Sunday occurrence.

On the other hand, I’d argue that the regular observance of the lesser festivals, including the various apostle days, is good for Lutherans. It draws us into the communion of saints, and it offers an occasional relief from the sometimes tedious “green seasons.”

In the end, of course, it is *adiaphora*, and some congregations can do one thing, others another. What irritates me is an incoherent decision by somebody somewhere that some lesser festivals are lesser than others. That, and the stealth decision by Augsburg to let their lesser festival bulletin track get off track by following that incoherent decision.

(I do want to add, however, that after my e-mail exchange, I received a follow-up phone call from someone else at Augsburg, who discussed my concerns with courtesy and interest, who listened to my suggestions and took notes on them, and who was just as responsive as I would hope the church’s publishing ministry would be. Kudos for that.)

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Lots of Löhe • This year is the bicentennial of the birth of Wilhelm Löhe, in my opinion an underrated father of Lutheranism in America (who, ironically, never set foot on American soil). Löhe is of particular interest because he is claimed, in one way or another, by both the ELCA and the LCMS. The latter church body is showing more interest in the bicentennial, with theological conferences at both St. Louis and Ft. Wayne focusing on the Bavarian pastor this month. Concordia in Ft. Wayne offers a “Wilhelm Löhe Conference: 162 Years Later” (the reference being to Löhe’s first dispatching of pastors to America) October 10-11. Concordia in St. Louis has an annual “Pieper Lectures” series, and they will focus on “William Löhe and the Missouri Synod” October 30-31 (though, in a nice gesture, one of the lecturers will be Craig Nesson

from Wartburg Seminary, speaking on “Löhe and the Iowa Synod”). John Pless of the Ft. Wayne faculty was recently elected one of the co-presidents of the International Löhe Society. The independent Lutheran journal *Logia* also focused on Löhe in its Holy Trinity 2008 issue, which you can purchase at www.logia.org. To make up for the late notice about the October conferences, mark your calendar for the next meeting of the International Löhe Society, which will be at the Ft. Wayne seminary July 26-30, 2011. With all this attention, someone really should work on publishing more of Löhe’s work in English. An English biography would be nice, too.

International ordination • Any pastor knows how difficult it can be to find pulpit supply, but there really ought to be some limits. Guest preacher at

Trinity (ELCA) in Lakewood, OH, one August Sunday was Dagmar Celeste, ex-wife of the former governor of Ohio and “among the first women priests ordained into the Catholic Church,” the newspaper announcement breathlessly tells us. This alleged ordination took place in 2002 in international waters (let’s see, isn’t that where Bill Clinton didn’t inhale?), and it got Ms. Celeste excommunicated. But never mind. Some of the best-known Lutheran preachers, historically speaking, have been excommunicated Roman Catholics, right? Right.

Humble repentance • ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson attended an “Ecumenical Pre-Conference” prior to the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City in August, and he began his presentation by washing the feet of two women who are HIV-positive. He made sure everyone recognized it was an act of “humility and repentance.” He also used it as an opportunity to insist that “male heterosexual religious leaders must be willing to talk about their own sexuality rather than talking about the sexuality of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered” (quoting the ELCA press release). I thought the accepted view of AIDS these days was that it really doesn’t primarily have to do with homosexuality. But everything always gets back to that, doesn’t it? The press release noted that the bishop’s action was well-received at the conference, but not everyone felt that way. One pastor’s reaction: “Darn! I’ve given communion to persons with AIDS (not just HIV-positive), held their hands, prayed with them, visited them in hospitals and

their homes, and officiated at their funerals and nobody ever put out a press release saying how wonderful I am. What am I doing wrong? Maybe I’m just not humble enough.” Another found “the presiding bishop’s public relations grandstanding on this . . . unconscionable. The popes have washed the feet of beggars on Maundy Thursday for centuries. Someone should tell the presiding bishop it’s just part of the job description of being a bishop.” A little cynical, perhaps, but probably not as cynical as a presiding bishop who does everything he can to put the “public” in “public church,” and brings everything around to the perceived faults of “male heterosexual religious leaders.”

Heavenly nachos • Now I can’t quite call it a flood of protest, but there have been some e-mails taking umbrage at the associate editor’s piece in August, “Family, feasting, football forever.” It seems to have been the football part that rankled some – a little too, well, testosterone-laden, perhaps? I must confess I’m not much interested in football, but I’m not quite willing to exclude it from the heavenly fields. I just hope I’m not expected to suit up. One reader claimed it was the first *FL* article in over thirty years that he stopped reading before getting to the end, which probably is a compliment when you think about it. Another reader wondered if Speckhard’s vision of heaven included any role for women other than providing nachos at half-time. I’m sure it does, though there are no doubt some strict limitations – he being LCMS and all.

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