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The long view of human nature



“Nat Glitsky didn’t like being interrupted when he was at Temple. Lots of times when he’d been younger, he’d been less than diligent at keeping the Sabbath, but now in his eighth decade he’d come to believe that the Ten Commandments had gotten everything exactly right if you wanted to have a world full of healthy and productive people. People should pay attention to the wisdom in all ten of them, he believed. . . . Keeping the Sabbath, taking a day off, kept you sane. But nowadays . . . keeping holy the Lord’s day was not only forgotten, it had been completely subverted, even reversed. Woe betide the lazy bum who took a whole day off every single week to reflect and try to gain some perspective on his life and work and the world around him. There wasn’t time for that. There was only work anymore. It was wrong. Nat’s working days were over, and all he wished now was that he’d kept the Sabbath sacred more often back when he’d get overwhelmed with child-raising or working or the pressures of his marriage. It might not have changed his life much, but at least it would have planted the seed in his son Abraham, who was always crushed under his workload, and who now was sitting – fidgeting, really – next to him. And that was what adhering to the commandments was all about, too. It was generational. It fostered the long view that human nature never changed. Only individual humans did. But not so often as you’d think.”
– John Lescroart, *Nothing but the Truth* (Delacorte Press, 1999).

Making sense of my life



I’m in that season of life when waves of nostalgia occasionally overwhelm me. Last year it was a 40th high school reunion. (I went, and couldn’t figure out why all my classmates sent their parents.) This fall I flew to Boise on impulse because three or four of my college roommates were converging there and I hadn’t seen them since graduation. I often find myself doing internet searches trying to learn “what ever happened to . . .”

Of course the real question I’m trying to answer is probably, “Whatever happened to me?” Nostalgia, the dictionary says, is a “wistful yearning to return to some past period.” I don’t really want to return anywhere, at least not for more than a visit, but I occasionally like to survey the road taken and try to make some sense of the journey. In the past year or so, there’ve been a couple of times when this need has become very strong.

Garage reorganization

The first happened last summer. My wife and her sister decided to reor-

ganize the garage. There are a couple of “nostalgia boxes” out there, things I’ve kept, dragging them from one place to another. Things that will one day cause my heirs to say, “What the heck is this, and why on earth did he keep it?” Nothing as bizarre as my grandmother’s gallstone, which I found when going through my mother’s things. But strange enough, at least to the uninformed.

I managed to hide some of this stuff before they got to it, but there was a box of papers I overlooked, and wouldn’t you know it, inquiring eyes got into it. I was ceremoniously presented with a little piece I had written around 1968. We were getting a new bishop (this was in my Methodist incarnation), and I was asked, as a freshman in college, to speak at his welcoming party on a topic something like “what youth hope for from our new bishop.” Stuff like that was big back then.

Anyway, this little speech was published in a denominational paper, and the yellowing clipping was presented to me by one of my children. It was kind of in the vein of “Gee, Dad, you had some really good things to say back then, all this talk of peace and social justice.” The undertone, of course, was, “What the heck happened?” My kids seem to think I’m conservative.

Pleasantly surprised

Then, in the fall, at the high school reunion, I had a brief chat with a girl I’d known in school. She was a very, very conservative Republican at the time, and – worse – an adamantly evangelical Christian. We occasionally got into arguments about politics and religion. She was interested – and surprised – to learn I had become a pastor.

A few days after the reunion, she e-mailed me. She had looked me up on-line, read some of my sermons, and was “pleasantly surprised” because in high school I had been such an “outspoken liberal.” These sermons did not reflect, she said, the person she had known in high school, and now she wondered when I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

I replied that what really mattered is Jesus Christ accepted me when I was baptized at age two months, and she apparently didn’t know me very well in high school.

When you’re the one on the journey, of course, you are much more aware of the continuities

than the changes. It’s like a child growing up. You don’t see her for a long time, and it’s hard to recognize her. But if you live with her every day, the changes are virtually imperceptible.

Metanarrative

So I don’t think so much about how I’ve changed. Oh, no doubt I’ve changed my mind about plenty of things along the way; who doesn’t? But in my view, the story of my life – the metanarrative, you might say – is really quite consistent. I’ve always loved Jesus. I’ve always been a part of his church; I doubt I’ve missed going to church on Sunday a dozen times since I was thirteen, even in college. I’ve always longed for peace in the world; at different times that longing has expressed itself in marches, political contributions, prayers or votes.

I’ve also always sought to foster justice for all, and to nurture human life. I remember quite distinctly the day the Supreme Court handed down *Roe v. Wade*. I was in seminary at the time. I was in the library, in the periodical room. One of my friends, a Presbyterian woman, came into the room with a big grin on her face. She explained the cause of her elation: that day the court had struck down abortion laws. She assumed I’d be equally thrilled (this was the roommate of the woman who had once told me I was the only male student at the seminary who really “got it” about women in ministry).

I hadn’t thought much about abortion then, except briefly in a college ethics class. But something in me said, “That’s just wrong.” I think I gave a non-committal response, but that night my heart was heavy. If Christians were truly to care for “the least of these,” how could one justify the taking of life in the womb? My reaction felt entirely consistent with everything I had ever believed. It still does.

Seriously out of step

That may have been the first time I consciously realized I was going to be seriously out of step for the rest of my life. Through high school I had thought of myself as kind of a rebel. It’s too long a story to tell here, but I actually got summarily removed from my high school and transferred to another school across town because the principal was tired of dealing with my troublemaking activism.

But in college (remember, this was the ‘60s), I lived in a world where I felt right at home. Every-

body was a rebel, everybody seemed to think pretty much like I did – well, except for my Christian faith. That was the piece that didn't quite fit in with the politics *de jour* at the big secular state college. Thinking back, even then I didn't quite conform to all the norms of non-conformity. Maybe my liberalism was too liberal to be confined by the canons of liberalism.

Litmus tests

Along the way somewhere, I made the discovery that very often "liberals" are less open-minded than "conservatives." Not always, to be sure, and not invariably, but often enough that it came as something of a surprise to me. In the political realm, the intolerance within the Democratic party (and I'm a registered Democrat, still) toward those who don't conform to the party line on abortion and related issues is the prime example. There are no doubt topics which are similar litmus tests for Republicans as well, but I'm hard-pressed to think of one that is quite so clear-cut – or one quite so mystifying to me, given the liberal commitment to helping and supporting the weak and powerless.

There are such litmus tests in the ecclesiastical world too, of course. We quickly sort out into parties, though we don't call it that. There's little tolerance for differences of opinion, for all the talk of "journeying together." That's unfortunate, but it's the way of the world.

Well, as I say, in my own journey, I see the continuity more than the disjunctions. I used to call myself "a political liberal, but a theological conservative." I don't say this much anymore, because the farther along this path I travel, the less meaning those terms seem to have. If I am sometimes inconsistent, or seem inconsistent, so what? The road twists and turns, but you keep going on. I've been this way all my life; I'm not likely to change now.

But as Gracia Grindal's translation of Samuel Rodigast's great hymn "Was Gott Tut" puts it, God "makes the best of all the stumbling turns we take, and loves us for his mercy's sake." (My opinion, depriving us of that phrase is one of *ELW*'s greatest faults.) I just try to stay on the road, make the turns gracefully, and not lose heart.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Confessions of a single issue voter



By the time you read this, the grueling, two-year national ordeal of the presidential election will have ended, and, barring some sort of nightmarish replay of the 2000 election, we'll know who our next president is. But as I write it is still in full swing. The conventions are over. The debates loom ahead. The commercials keep coming 24/7. And much as I complain along with everyone else, deep down I have to admit I'm into it. Polls, blogs, YouTube – there is almost nothing too tangential to attract my attention.

The election this year features four utterly amazing candidates. There is Barak Obama, the post-racial, post-partisan candidate of hope, whose lofty vision and soaring rhetoric combined with his quintessential only-in-America personal story make him a once-in-a-generation gift from God. Then there is Sarah Palin – hockey mom, moose hunter, beauty queen, accomplished governor of the exotic state of Alaska, who took on the old boys' network and won (just like on TV) – whose surprise selection

electrified social conservatives and the long dormant Republican base.

The other two

Then there is Barak Obama, inexperienced lightweight, certified radical, doctrinaire anti-American, friend of terrorists and product of crooked Chicago machine politics, whose retro-60s agenda repackaged in a nice suit threatens Western Civilization and all we hold dear. And then there is Sarah Palin, dangerously unqualified product of marketing and cynical political calculations, who probably can't even tie her own shoes without a team of handlers. Those are the four players.

Oh yes, there are also two other guys whose names I can't remember. They both seem nice enough.

One key feature of the two fresh faces on the scene, Obama and Palin, is that they inspire such frenzied, over-the-top and contradictory descriptions that each of them must in fact be two separate

people. People heap praise upon them that would make angels blush, or scorn that Judas would have to work hard to live up to. Most people have seen two of the candidates described above—the savior Obama and the she-Quayle Palin, or else the empty suit Obama and the utterly tough but fresh Palin. But I've seen all four, and I did it by performing a psychological experiment on myself.

Let me explain

In case you want to try it for yourself, let me explain. As a pro-life, conservative Republican I had just about given up on this election. Just prior to the Democrats' convention in Denver my wife and I had talked it over and decided that if McCain picked a pro-choice running mate, we weren't going to vote for him. We weren't sure exactly what we would do instead. But since I didn't really think I had a dog in this fight, and so many people spoke so glowingly of Obama, I decided to watch his acceptance speech in a new way.

I had always seen Obama as shallow, all talk, a cheap celebrity, a guy nobody would have ever heard of if he didn't happen to be black. But some people I know and respect spoke of him almost as though he had changed their lives just by running, and though I couldn't for the life of me see in him anything resembling what they described, I decided to try to see it their way. And what I did to change my own perception of him as he gave his big speech was to imagine he was pro-life. Everything else about him would remain the same—the weird, America-hating church, the shady Chicago connections, the inexperience and lack of accomplishments—but I pretended that instead of (incredibly) voting against the born-alive infant protection act, he had dramatically stood up to his party to embrace a comprehensively pro-life view.

Obama transformed

When I did this, it was like magic. He was transformed before my eyes. As he gave his speech, suddenly the rhetoric didn't seem so empty; it seemed sincere and powerful. His narrative seemed poignant and right for America, his biography compelling and potentially healing for our nation, and so on. Basically, all the things that people gushed about him seemed true to me as long as I saw him as pro-life, even if he was talking about urban develop-

ment or Afghanistan. But when I stopped pretending, he became the man behind the curtain again. I did this twice during his acceptance speech and was literally amazed at the difference. It was like putting on and taking off 3-D glasses or something. For me the abortion issue was the critical lens, the key to seeing both of the Obamas.

Then Palin hit the scene. As a pro-lifer I was jazzed. I had been hoping for months she would be chosen, but assumed McCain didn't have it in him not to disappoint me. Within hours of the announcement I had made my first-ever donation to a presidential campaign. But I decided to do this same experiment with her big speech.

So as she made her debut, I imagined that after giving birth to her fifth child she had not talked about the value of his Down's syndrome-affected life but instead had made a speech in which she said that, while she stands by her choice, the experience made her see she could never demand that others make the same difficult choice not to abort, and so, as a maverick, she was bucking the GOP to embrace a pro-choice position.

Another transformation

When I looked at her through those imaginary, pro-choice glasses, I agreed with the pundits and thought, "Who is this silly woman and why should anyone care what she says? Is this some sort of joke?" Then I stopped pretending, and as she kept speaking what had moments before seemed trite suddenly seemed substantive again. Where I had been seeing a lightweight I once again saw a tough-as-nails yet winsome, inspiring reformer. I tried it again, and the same thing happened in my mind exactly as it had during Obama's speech. As long as the speaker was pro-life (in reality or my imagination) the speech connected with me and in a sense rang true. The words on every topic, be it the NRA or tax reform seemed substantive, sincere, and at least reasonable even if I disagreed with the point being made. And viewed through this lens, no blot in the speaker's biography or political record was too glaring to be explained away; a pro-life stance covers a multitude of sins.

And as long as the speaker was (again, in reality or my imagination) pro-choice, the speech seemed tinny and the speaker ridiculous if not dangerous. Even the speaker's mannerisms and voice

became irritating to me.

Pro-life communists

Since college I have always said I would vote for a pro-life communist over a pro-choice Republican. That doesn't mean I don't care about other issues; I have strong opinions about a lot of political things. If both candidates were pro-life, I'd choose between them on other important issues. But abortion is for me the absolute deal-breaker. Pro-choice politicians don't even meet the threshold of basic credibility for me. If someone can't get this issue right, I just have a hard time listening to them go on

about ethanol or immigration.

I am not apologizing for this outlook, but stating it as a fact about myself. It isn't something I'm working to overcome or I wish weren't true. My position seems perfectly reasonable to me given my belief (nay, empirical knowledge) that human life begins at conception. Nor do I think my view lacks nuance, context, or broad perspective. At least I've studied all four candidates (and those two other guys, too) before casting my ballot, which is more than a lot of people can say.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

This here church

by Mark Mattes, with some additional thoughts by the editor



Not only in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's sexuality discussions, but in numerous other venues, it is common to hear the ELCA described as "this church." For instance, in the draft human sexuality statement, the phrase "this church" occurs more than a hundred times. "This church" talk seems to creep up in ELCA lingo when we deal with matters about which both leaders and members within the ELCA don't see eye to eye—we are a diverse church with conflicting opinions on a variety of topics. Such a claim would appear to be a relatively innocent truism. The truth of the matter, though, is that the talk of "this church" reveals a sleight of hand.

The purpose of theologians, pastors, and other leaders, when speaking about the theological or ethical stances of the church, is not to present the results of a poll. The faith and life of the church is not to be based on a theology of public opinion. Rather, if we are true to the biblical faith expressed in our creeds and confessions, then we seek to represent nothing other than the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in our faith and life. Rather than embracing the teaching of "the church," talk of "this church" does precisely the opposite: it separates us from our catholic and apostolic identity.

Thus to speak of the diversity of "this church" evades the real agenda. An expression of "the church" should seek to be true to its catholic heritage. That criterion sets the limit for how diverse

we should be. The sleight of hand involved in speaking of "this church" is that the recognition of diversity evades the whole question of fidelity, a matter which should be at the forefront of the church's witness.

Even more than that, the hidden assumption of the talk of "this church" is that description becomes prescription: the fact that we don't see eye to eye on numerous matters somehow seems to imply that we needn't see eye to eye, and shouldn't. A right to one's views supersedes loyalty to the church's apostolic witness. If "this church" defines itself as intentionally diverse with respect to matters of faith and life, then it would be unethical to question or uproot that very diversity.

Dodging the question

In a word, where we are dodges the question of where we should be. This dodging works to the advantage of the "revisionist" party within the church. Revisionists assume that if the question of fidelity to the catholic tradition were pushed in "this church," then the progressive movement in "this church" would walk, leaving "this church" with fewer resources and members. (An alternative to leaving, of course, would be repentance and faith.) But, in matters held dear to revisionists, whether proposed changes for *Vision and Expectations* or the use of traditional language in liturgical matters, it is far more likely that "conservatives" or "confes-

sionalists" would leave the ELCA rather than liberals. And the word on the street is that the ELCA is prepared to accept losses from among conservatives.

The talk of "this church" works to the advantage of the "revisionist" agenda. By equalizing the playing field of public opinion—by acknowledging our diverse confessional and ethical perspectives—we take away leverage to evaluate in a public way who is and who isn't faithful. It leads to the assumption that we should agree to disagree, a permissive inclusive of both or all views, a least-common-denominator approach. Thereby the revisionist side is favored.

Truth by poll-taking

Think of it this way. Perhaps a significant percentage of ELCA clergy are semi-Pelagian and a significant percentage of ELCA laity are outright Pelagian. The truth of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is not based on taking a poll. That doctrine is true, no matter how many ELCA members don't believe it. The truth about church doctrines, practices, or expectations is not to be based on how diverse our opinions or practices are but on how to be true to our catholic faith.

A house divided against itself cannot stand. If that is the case, then why build division within the ranks? Synod means "same path." How can we remain a synod (one path) if in fact we are many paths? The mantra of "this church" just might turn out to be the end of this church.

The "revisionist" camp in the ELCA tends institutionally to have the upper hand. The Conference of Bishops, many seminary and college faculty members, and a significant number of clergy and laity support revisionist agendas, or at least have no intent of challenging them. To talk of diversity in "this church" evades the fact that in many respects we aren't diverse at all. Revisionism is the dominant trend, as testified in its institutions and much of its leadership.

But if that is the case, then "this church" cannot ask for loyalty from all its constituency, particularly when the more conservative element in it is so poorly represented in its decision-making venues.

Let's take leave of "this church." Let's aim to do what we can do well and should be doing for the sake of the world—properly distinguishing law from gospel so that God's promise of the risen

Christ can be clearly heard.

Mark Mattes is professor of philosophy and religion and chairs those departments at Grand View College, Des Moines, IA. He is the author of The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology (Eerdmans, 2004), and helps edit articles for Logia and Lutheran Quarterly.

Some additional thoughts by the editor

Mark Mattes has argued persuasively that the common ELCA terminology "this church" works to the advantage of "revisionists" by enshrining diversity of opinion as a clear and irrevocable value. I do not disagree with his analysis; but my objection to the phrase "this church" goes deeper than its impact on the current political reality in the ELCA.

First, however, an historical note: "This church" is a phrase that seems to have arisen in the early life of the former Lutheran Church in America. It was the LCA whose constitution consistently used the descriptor "this church"; the American Lutheran Church, founded two years earlier, generally repeated its full title whenever that was necessary, or sometimes just referred to "the church."

LCA neologism

As far as I can tell, "this church" was a neologism with the LCA; such references don't appear to be common in any of its predecessor bodies. While recovering precisely why the LCA adopted this language is probably a hopeless task at this distance, I can think of two possible reasons, one arising, shall we say, from humility, and one from pride. The former would be an acknowledgement that the LCA (or any church body) is not *the church* in the comprehensive sense—certainly a salutary bit of self-recognition. The more prideful reason was perhaps a need by the leaders of the LCA to distinguish themselves from "those other Lutherans" who were just a couple of years ahead of them on the merger track—we're *this church*, not that other church. Probably there was some of each—subconscious, perhaps, but still at work in influencing how those early 1960s Lutherans conceived the new body they were about to form.

In this, as in many other things, the LCA usage seems to have passed into the ELCA without

much consideration or thought. I do not suggest any conspiracy at work here; certainly on most important issues where there were differences among the merging bodies, there was frank discussion and deliberate decision-making about how things would be in the “new Lutheran church” (remember that phrase?). Sometimes they went one way, sometimes the other; sometimes they came up with an entirely new way.

My observation, however, based on my experience back then at the synodical level (and in a synod where there was a nearly equal balance between former LCA and ALC, as well as a strong number of former AELC), is that mundane matters such as terminology generally went the way of the LCA by default—no doubt for good reason, since the LCA’s documents were considerably “tighter” in terms of language than the ALC’s.

So what significance does “this church” have now, twenty years later? I’m not convinced that there are nefarious reasons or deliberate sleight of hand behind the use of the phrase today; after all, it has been around for a while now, long before we ever thought there might be conflicts between those Dr. Mattes terms “revisionists” and “conservatives.”

But I think Dr. Mattes is right on the money that the phrase “separates us from our catholic and apostolic identity.” By implying that “this church”

has a reality, an identity apart from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, it engenders a sense that the ELCA can go its own way, do its own thing, and generally disregard the rest of Christendom.

Second the motion

Now let’s be honest: on a whole raft of things, the ELCA—or any church body—in fact does things that are unique to itself, or does things in a way that is all its own. Nobody’s questioning that. It could not really be otherwise.

But on the big things, “this church”—if truly “church”—should be much less important than “the church.” Our language should reflect that reality. Talk of “this church” anchors us firmly in the ELCA constitution, approved in 1987. But that is hardly what is most important about our identity. We are “the church,” born, we often say, on the Day of Pentecost. We’re not the totality of it, to be sure. But what is most important about the ELCA is not the many points where it is peculiar (I’m using that word in the non-pejorative sense, of course), but where it is catholic and apostolic.

And so I second Dr. Mattes’s motion: Let’s take leave of “this church”—not for “that church” or “some other church,” but for the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Bon voyage • Our colleague Pr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, editor of *Lutheran Forum*, has just accepted a job with the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France (check them out at www.ecumenical-institute.org). One of her responsibilities will be to serve as the consultant for the international Lutheran/Orthodox dialogue. We are pleased and relieved to say that she will continue her editorial duties at *Lutheran Forum*, but if the Winter issue should be a tad tardy, chalk it up to the distractions of a transoceanic relocation.

Lots of response • There’s been quite a lot of response to “A new song to whom it may concern” (*FL* September, 2008). In fact, that article has generated more mail than anything else since yours truly took over the editorship of this publication. Many writers

told their own horror stories about “contemporary hymns.” One correspondent reported a song introduced at an ELCA pastoral conference with lyrics that said, “I am an atheist when it comes to the gods of violent jihad . . . but I believe in you the artist of trees and galaxies.” The pastors were invited to recite the lyrics as a confession of faith. Incredibly, most did. Another reader pleaded for my reaction to Bp. Hanson’s sermon at the installation service of which I spoke. Hey, come on. I have to live in this synod. No comment.

Bellwether • Oh, well, one comment. Among other things, in the aforementioned sermon Bp. Hanson referred to the Sierra Pacific Synod as the “bellwether synod” of the ELCA. Everybody liked that reference, and it has been repeated more than once in synodical

gatherings since then. We out here on the left coast like thinking we're the trend-setters. Being ignorant of the precise derivation of the term, I looked it up in my *Oxford English Dictionary*. It's an older edition now, but still serviceable; and it is "English," so they spell it "bell-wether" with a hyphen. Still, great definitions, and apt. "The leading sheep of a flock, on whose neck a bell is hung." Of course Jesus had some things to say about sheep without a shepherd, but never mind. The *OED* goes on to say, "Hence **Bell-wethering**, the act of leading and being led like sheep." Yeah, that works. Or, figuratively, "A clamorous person, one ready to give mouth." Gotta love those Brits. But language changes even faster than technology, so I checked out Dictionary.com, where I found "a person who leads a mob, mutiny, conspiracy, or the like; ringleader." I can see that definition working here, too. Maybe the *OED* was just too delicate to spell it out (as I said, it's an older edition), but the etymology comes from a bell-wearing wether. A wether is a castrated sheep. Just so you know.

The single life • Often the argument for "full inclusion" of "sexual minorities" in the ministry of the church is that gays and lesbians should be held to the same standards as everyone else — so recognize their right to marry, and then we've got one set of standards for everyone. But it doesn't stop there. At a recent event at one of the ELCA seminaries, a bishop was the speaker and the first Q in the Q&A came from one of the professors. The gist of it was something like this: "Here's a question that has

come up several times in my classes. We have a lot of students who are single. Singleness is not just a stop on the road to marriage, but some people have a vocation to be single. But they don't have a vocation to celibacy. When are we going to recognize that single people, too, have a right to sexual expression? I mean, *Vision and Expectations* could have been written by my grandmother. All we're doing with these unreasonable rules is encouraging people to lie." Actually, I would have thought we were encouraging people to live their lives chastely and with moral seriousness. Or perhaps encouraging them to discern whether they really are called to ordained ministry if they find the moral demands of Christianity to be unpalatable. It does make one wonder whether there is now, among seminary professors of a certain type, any sexual behavior that is judged immoral (beyond the clearly abusive). It reminded me of a comment I overheard many years ago now at a church assembly. The resolution that was being debated was one that called for "faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness" (or something like that). A pastor sitting behind me breathlessly explained this to the lay person from her church: "Do you realize," she asked, "this means they are saying that a pastor who is single cannot have sex?" Shocking indeed! I wish I could say that the bishop at this recent event responded with some kind of suggestion that there might actually be a Christian moral teaching on sexuality, but I cannot. One good thing, at least: the professor involved doesn't teach ethics or pastoral care.

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