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Whatever



Every time I would stop [my pastor] Leland L. Laurens on the street or even go to his office, which he called his study (that comes from going to the Seminary, too, in my opinion) to discuss the way I personally was interpreting something I'd read in the Bible, he'd wind up rolling his eyes extra patient like and saying, "Whatever," and just keep walking on. Take, for instance, the first miracle, the one at Cana, where the Philistines or some such run out of wine when they was carousing at that wedding. I run into him on the curb one day just as the mail run and told Leland L. Laurens that my faith wouldn't let me believe that the Lord Jesus Christ condoned alcohol in any shape, form, or fashion or had anything at all to do with it. I told him that I had become to interpret the Bible passage as Jesus turned that water into plain grape juice, just like we have at Communion at First Baptist with the Nabisco saltines all crumbled up. It hadn't never sowed or fermented, and that bunch . . . whooping it up at Cana hadn't drunk anything like that in so many years they'd plumb forgot how good fresh grape juice tastes and that's how come they said it was the best of the evening. And that didn't take nothing away at all from the Lord Jesus Christ, for it's as plain as the nose on your face that it takes every bit as big a miracle to turn a barrel of water into grape juice as it does into wine. Leland L. Laurens shut his eyes for a extra long moment and then he says, "Whatever," and then he tipped his hat to Miss Lorraine Graham and walked on in the post office. And ever since that day I've been calling him Brother Whatever behind his back and down in my heart, where only Jesus can see and that psychiatrist wanted to go prying and plundering around except I wasn't about to let him. — Ferrol Sams, "The Widow's Mite" in *The Widow's Mite and Other Stories* (Penguin Books, 1987), 11-12.

Those three kings



I love it when Epiphany falls on a Sunday, as it does in this year of our Lord 2013. There are such riches in the texts for the day. I confess I gave up a long time ago trying to do an Epiphany service in the normal years when it falls on a weekday; nobody in my parish ever seemed very interested. Once in a while I've unilaterally declared the second Sunday after Christmas (when there is such) as "Epiphany Sunday," and transferred the festival to that January day. But that doesn't quite seem right. The last few years I've been content with the fact that a community children's chorus our congregation has sponsored reprises their Christmas concert on January 6. The artistic director, a devout Roman Catholic, thinks it's cool to observe Epiphany in that

way, and I agree. It isn't quite "worship," but it's close enough. They even do a take on a medieval nativity pageant. When the Magi enter, I always get goosebumps.

The wise guys

One thing I especially like is the opportunity to tell the story of the Magi (the "wise guys," as they are sometimes called). The story has always fascinated me. When I was a boy, there was a Lutheran congregation a few blocks up the street whose exterior "Christmas" decoration was a very simple outline of three kings on camels approaching Bethlehem. It wasn't liturgically correct, of course — though I suppose the Magi must have set out on their journey quite a few days before Christmas, so maybe having them there in December was OK. It did make an impression on a young Methodist boy, however, and I can't say I have such a clear memory of any other Christmas display I've ever seen.

Of course no gospel story has had more legend and mythology grow up around it than this one. On Epiphany we will sing "We Three Kings," but right there in the first three words are two problems. Matthew doesn't say there were three of them. The early church actually often visualized a dozen, and as late as the medieval period you'll see paintings with two or four. The idea that there were three seems to have come from their bearing three gifts.

Traditionalist that I am, however, I'm willing to stick with three. Heck, I'll even call them Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, and I wouldn't be surprised if they brought a kid named Amahl along with them.

Not kings, but professors

And then, no matter how many of them there were, they weren't kings. This is something Luther stressed in his preaching on the Epiphany text. He sometimes compared them to philosophers or professors, and sometimes even worse — they were magicians and conjurers. But not kings. That idea came in through a sort of midrash on Psalm 72.10, "May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts." (Though if the kings were coming from the East, one would think they'd have a ways to go if they were kings of the coastlands.)

I've always thought it best just to leave the word untranslated — they were *magi*. What I love

about that is that magi were problematic for the early church — witness the story of Simon Magus in Acts 8. For the first Christians, magi were pretty disreputable — dabblers in superstition and magic, astrologers out following a star.

Uncircumcised heathens

And yet it was they who came from afar to seek the infant Christ. The usual interpretation of this passage is that it is about the Gentiles coming to Christ (the Magi were "uncircumcised heathens," Luther notes).

What I find even more remarkable than their ethnicity is their spirituality. I live in an area where New Age teachings are all the rage. You can pick up literature at any local organic food store (there are several), and in many other shops and stores. These New Agers are very nice people; I don't think our local homeless shelter could survive without their generous support. I see them as representing a genuine, though misguided, hunger for God. Not unlike the Magi, I imagine.

Augustine put it best: "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." And that's the church's task, is it not? That's our mission: to proclaim the good news that this Savior born in Bethlehem is the Lord, he is God among us. It is he and he alone who can satisfy the hunger in the human heart, and fill the emptiness in the human soul. The church has many other functions, to be sure. We are called to serve others, we are given the wonderful gift of fellowship with one another, we provide a context for learning and growing. But first and foremost, above everything else, we are here to proclaim that in Jesus Christ, God has come among us, and that only in Jesus Christ can human beings find salvation.

Giving it up

One day — oh, it must be nearly 40 years ago now, when I still did things like this — I picked up a hitchhiker. He was a quiet, sensitive-looking young man in his twenties (about my age at the time) whose accent revealed he was from New Zealand. I asked him where he was coming from, and he told me he had just spent several days at a Trappist monastery here in Northern California.

Gradually his story unfolded. He had left New Zealand after high school, and had been traveling the world since then. He had been involved in a

variety of movements—political movements, spiritual movements—and a variety of lifestyles. He had, he said, been searching for something he could never seem to find—until recently he had discovered Jesus Christ. Suddenly his search seemed over. He had found a peace and satisfaction quite unlike anything he had ever known. His restless heart was now at rest.

Finding rest

And now he was preparing to enter the monastery—to give up everything he valued and possessed, and to turn his entire life over to Christ. He was offering to Christ the symbols of his own search, quite like those visitors from the East offered

to the Babe the symbols of their own life-long quest for meaning and truth.

We who have been claimed by Christ are given a commission. Our world is filled with people looking for the light we have found but not knowing where to find it. They search in many places, but find only darkness. Our task is essentially the same described in Ephesians 3, the traditional Epistle for Epiphany: “To bring to the nations the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church”—through you and me—“the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.” That is our task; that is our calling.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Just a pair of shoes: a parable of pastoral life

By Jeremy Loesch



I purchased a new pair of black dress shoes online for my birthday. My old pair of Nunn Bush shoes needed to be retired. They had served me well; they were beautifully simple black dress shoes. But they were run-down at the heels. They were scuffed, and the shine had vanished long ago. There was a hole in the sole that allowed moisture to seep in. Even though I loved those shoes, the time had come to replace them.

The new pair arrived. They were Steve Maddens and they looked very pretty. The stitching looked great, the laces were fresh, and they shone from every angle. They looked ready for action! I put the new shoes next to the old shoes on the shoe rack in our closet. I smiled to myself as I thought about wearing them the next day!

Voices from the closet

I was folding some clothes and straightening a few items in the closet when I thought I heard some talking. With a family of six, it’s never quiet, so to hear talking is far from unusual. I looked out of the closet and didn’t see anyone. Perhaps I was imagining things, which again is not uncommon. I went back to my task but the hushed talking continued. I stopped and listened. I looked around the closet but there was nothing. Were the sounds com-

ing from the shoe rack? Could it be the shoes?

“I can’t believe I am finally out of that box! I’m ready to go! Are those pants? And shirts? I’d look so good with that pair of trousers!” Steve Madden exclaimed.

“You certainly would, my young friend. With your looks and style I’d imagine you are in for quite an experience,” Nunn Bush replied with a knowing tone.

Flash and pizzazz

“You know it! Here I come with all the flash and pizzazz I was made with!”

“Really? Tell me—Steve, is it?—just where do you think it is you’re going?”

“Hmm . . . I, uh, don’t really know. I’ve not had to answer that question before. But look at me! The design on the toe, the comfort insole, it’s obvious I’m made to go great places!”

“Great places indeed! Tell me: what do you consider to be these great places?”

“You know—important places that have halls with marble or tile floors so when I walk, people will hear me coming and get out of my way. I imagine there will be platforms or a dais so that when I stand up there I will be seen and people will know that I am with someone who is important because I look like I am important. Those are the plac-

es I'll go. I'll be remembered and people will be glad that they got to see me."

"Steven, those are good thoughts. I used to think that way myself."

"You had those thoughts? But look at you! You're ugly. You're worn out. Dull. Faded. Your laces are frayed. Don't you have any pride in your condition?"

Rain, mud, snow and slush

"Again, I used to think the thoughts you express. But it's hard being a pair of shoes. Life isn't all tile and carpet, sitting and standing. Sometimes there is rain and mud, snow and slush. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"Not exactly. Inspector 13 never said anything about mud. And what's slush?"

"You'll learn soon enough. Would you like to learn how I came to be faded? And I'll ignore that you called me ugly. I really did look, talk, and think like you, once upon a time."

"I highly doubt you looked like me. But if we're going to be here all night, I suppose I don't have a choice but to listen, do I?"

"Not really Steven."

The old scuffed Nunn Bush rolled the eyelets of his frayed laces and continued, "There will indeed be tile hallways, and the clacking of your shoes will be noticeable. But you'll be in hospitals and you'll be trying to find someone so you can stand next their bed, so a hand can be held, some Scripture passages read, a hymn sung. You'll be taken to waiting rooms and you will sit with familiar people and with strangers. You'll meet all kinds of shoes there. And the words that are spoken will sound strange to you at first, but if your tongue is still the words will become familiar, soothing, and nice. It will be a jumbled time of emotions with anxiety and confusion competing for the top spot. You'll be there and other words will be shared to bring hope to a hopeless situation, comfort to a confounding circumstance. Maybe you'll even walk down a hallway so that new parents can be visited and a day-old infant can be held. There you'll hear words of blessing and encouragement, words of hope and promise."

Scuffs

The fresh pair of Steve Maddens was silent,

his tongue having fallen down to the insole. "That doesn't sound so bad; it kind of sounds nice. Is that where some of your scuffs came from?"

"A few. See this mark here? That mark came from repeatedly being banged against a bed post. A dying man was being comforted. The promises that God had made were being spoken. Hymns of comfort and hope were being sung. Christmas hymns and Easter hymns were prayed in a soft voice. It was a long night, and that mark was worth it."

"Do you think I'll get marks like those?" Steve Madden almost sounded hopeful.

"Without a doubt," replied Nunn. "We're shoes after all. We were made with care to go everywhere."

"It sounds fairly exciting."

Going begrudgingly

"At times it is. Walking on those hard floors can be blessedly jarring. But there are times when you'll be cushioned in thick carpet. It'll be soft and warm and plush, yet the words spoken will be cold and painful. Parents will weep over their children. Husbands and wives will speak of regret. People will reveal things that had long been hidden. Angry words will be hurled, often at the person you are carrying. You'll feel like running but you won't be able to move, for that carpet will be like glue."

"I'll make sure I won't go to those places." Steven said defiantly.

"You say that now. But you'll go. Trust me."

"Then I'll go begrudgingly. I'll drag my heels!"

"Of course you will," Nunn Bush said with a chuckle, "but soon enough those will be your favorite places to go."

"I don't understand."

Jesus words

"At first I didn't understand either. I came to learn that the words, whether confused, angry, betrayed, heartbroken, or sorrowful, those words were met with Jesus words. Jesus words are entirely gift words, words that have Jesus as the noun, Jesus as the subject of the verbs. Jesus words repeatedly carry with them the mercy and grace of God."

"Jesus words sound special!"

"They are. They are special in their honesty and their directness. Jesus words can break a heart

of stone in such a way that the other person enjoys the fracturing. And Jesus words can mend a broken heart and make it like new."

"Words healing and mending? That seems backward, like tying the shoes before they are even on the foot. Do you mean Jesus words can bring good out of bad and make the darkness seem light?"

"That is often the way that it works."

"So is that how you got all of your scuffs and scrapes?"

Everyday use

"No, a few of them came from those joyfully difficult situations. But honestly, most of the marks came from everyday use, from doing what you were made to do. You will be worn when sins are washed away through water and the Word of God. You will be worn when the body of Christ is placed into people's mouths and when the blood of Christ is poured down their throats. You'll be worn to nursing homes and to rehab centers."

"Wow! That sounds amazing! I'll get to be around so many people. If you say that I'll get scuffed and blemished and wrinkled and my shine may fade, then I'll wear those marks with pride!"

"I would hope so, because it is pretty amazing. We shoes look good at first; we even smell good, or at least we don't smell bad. But situations and circumstances can change and the attention is no longer lavished upon us. We merely carry the feet, keep them dry and warm, and at the end of the day are kicked off and stashed in this closet with Reebok over there who's not smart enough to know that he's got dog poop in his tread, and those lazy loafers, and those old house slippers."

"That's awful! Were you really treated like that? After all the places you had been? After the things you had done? Shoes like you are kept with shoes like them?"

"Steven, I was just a pair of shoes. I was

made to be worn. I was used, which is exactly what I had hoped for. You want to be worn, don't you?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

Be worn

"Then be worn, Steven. Go where you are taken. Stand where you are given to stand. One day you may stand at a graveside and I want you to be there happily, even if it is just you and the cemetery workers. Attentively listen to the words that are spoken, the prayers that are prayed, the verse that is sung, and be proud that you are where you are supposed to be. The one who wears you needs you to do your job so that he can do what the Lord has placed him there to do. Be happy to sit contentedly under the table as class is conducted. Be content to sit there tapping as a phone conversation is held, as keys are struck on the keyboard, as he absentmindedly walks through a puddle and carelessly spills coffee on you. You are going to be where you are needed. Be content with that."

As I arranged some of my sweaters and looked at some shirts on hangers, the Steve Maddens sat still on the shoe rack with the laces quietly folded as if they were hands. It appeared to me that the new shoes were stumbling over all that the scuffed Nunn Bush's had spilled out.

"Do you think that the wearer loves you?" Steven asked the old shoes.

"I know he does. He took me places I never dreamed. He kept me longer than I deserved."

"Then I suppose I'll be worn, with all that the word means. I'll go where he takes me. I'll walk when he says walk and I'll stand when he says stand. I'll do what I'm given to do."

"Though you are new Steven, you sound like you've walked around the block a few times."

Jeremy Loesch is pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church (LCMS), Newark, DE. He and his family reside in Elkton, MD.

2,000 verses?



A couple of months ago, in the midst of the Presidential election, I wrote an article for our congregation's newsletter. It was essentially a lament that partisan politics and reli-

gion have become so deeply fused in America. Whereas Republicans and Democrats used to worship side-by-side in equal parts, now we are slowly defaulting to congregations that can be identified as

“Republican” or “Democrat.” Even though this is probably irreversible for a lot of reasons, it is not a good thing. Both parties are full of rot-gut sinners, and congregations would be healthier and more intellectually honest if confident Republicans and proud Democrats could set politics aside and worship together on a regular basis.

Only a few members actually seem to have read it. But one delightful non-member did. She’s the executive director of a local charity, and she mentioned the article during a meeting with a clergy advisory board. Of course I blushed with embarrassment. But I went ahead and summarized the article for my colleagues who had not read the article. From what I could tell, they tended to agree with my premise.

Partisan apparatchiks

One pastor quickly commented that it was a shame that pastors had become apparatchiks of the Republican party, using issues like homosexuality and abortion to steer congregations in a more conservative direction. Before I could respond, another pastor gently reminded him that there were pastors equally committed to the ideals of the Democratic party. (I wanted to tell him to subscribe to the ELCA’s e-Advocacy email [er, e-mail] if he didn’t agree with that.)

He seemed to shrug that off saying, in essence, that there are about 2,000 Bible verses that speak to poverty and only one or two that speak to abortion. And we all know about those mere six texts that speak to homosexuality. The implication was that no one should really take those issues seriously because the authors of scripture devoted so little papyrus to them. Therefore, since there are 2,000 verses regarding poverty, it is perfectly defensible for a pastor to focus mostly on social justice and/or redistribution of wealth, even at the expense of issues like abortion and/or marriage.

An old, old argument

I was catapulted back to my days in seminary and disputes with my former bishop. Here was the old argument again, that what the Bible speaks to the most frequently must be the most important. But is that how we interpret scripture? Does “2,000 references to poverty” mandate congregational priorities? Do we use sheer volume of texts to deter-

mine what God finally deems important?

I don’t think so. Let’s compare the issues. Matters of life, marriage and procreation are foundational to the entire biblical narrative. In the very first chapters of Genesis we see the institution of marriage and the commandment to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:27-28, 2:24). There are a number of texts (Jeremiah 1:5, Psalm 139:13, John 10:10 and Luke 1:41) that speak to life, especially life in the womb, as precious. The life and even the Gospel of Jesus Christ begin with his miraculous conception in Mary’s womb. And who can forget the lovely story of John leaping in Elizabeth’s womb?

Marriage and abortion needed little attention in the scriptures because they were widely understood for what they were. God clearly loves life and creation; he chose to create, after all. And he intended us to procreate, to play a role in his continuing work of creation. If there is no marriage and procreation in the first place, there are no societies in which members are rich or poor, in which money is equally or unequally distributed.

Counting verses

So it doesn’t mean much if something is rarely mentioned in the Bible. How many verses do we actually have that articulate the doctrine of justification in Romans, Ephesians and Galatians? Certainly enough, but I’m guessing fewer than 2,000. How many direct verses do we have about baptism, or the Lord’s Supper? How about the inspiration of the scriptures? Even the resurrection of Jesus doesn’t get a lot of run. But we sure make a big deal about the Word and the Sacraments and the world being turned upside down because Christians believed the resurrection of Jesus to be true.

But let us go at least one step deeper. Let us assume that the Biblical witness is clear regarding poverty and it should be the chief concern of Christians. Let us suppose that those 2,000 verses clearly indicate Christian moral priorities. Does the Bible then offer us some protocol for carrying this out in every time and place?

What’s the blueprint?

It seems not. While our “Two Realms” doctrine certainly provides for a government to care for the poor in some capacity, in the end, no political party of 21st century America is offered a blueprint

in the Bible. You and I are, though! The responsibility to care for the poor begins with us, plain and simple. We may do that alongside or through a political party, but it is hard to argue, as this pastor was doing, that the Bible prefers one party or candidate over another.

And then there is this devastating verse from Jesus regarding poverty (John 12:8): “For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.” Jesus was quite aware how often poverty is referenced in the scriptures. And yet, he says that right praise and worship of him comes even before the poor, or perhaps alongside our care for the poor.

Why pick and choose?

I certainly do not want to suggest we stop caring for the poor or that we shouldn't be Christian Democrats if we so choose. I just want to put to bed the pernicious idea that the frequency with which a matter is mentioned in the Bible should determine

what we value. It's a weak argument. A paucity of Biblical mention may simply indicate that something was assumed at the time. The orders of creation and the value of life seem pretty clear throughout the scriptures; how to care for the poor was not, so God told them again and again what to do and how to do it.

In the meantime, we should stop pitting our care for the poor against marriage and abortion as matters of Christian concern, even if there is a wide disparity in the frequency of verses. We should stop especially if we find that we have thereby been justifying our own political leanings. There's nothing to prevent us from speaking up for human dignity from conception to natural death, caring for the poor and defending marriage as between one man and one woman. Why pick and choose? We are called to do it all.

Evan McClanahan, STS, is pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church (NALC) in Houston, TX.

Omnium gatherum



Global Lutheran youth weigh in • Lutheran World Information, the media arm of Lutheran World Federation, in a recent

story led with this: “As the latest United Nations climate change negotiations begin in Doha, Lutheran youth from across the globe have converged on the Qatari capital [Doha] to raise their voices for concrete action, and to bring tangible lessons home to their churches and communities.” Turns out the “Lutheran youth from across the globe” amounted to an LWF delegation of nine persons, aged 21 to 29. I'm kind of inclined to agree with a comment by my predecessor, Russ Saltzman: “I don't know which scares me more — climate change, or ‘Lutheran youth’ doing something about it.” But at least this should lay to rest the accusations that the ELCA has too much power in the LWF; in the ELCA's constitutionally mandated language, these people weren't “youth” at all, they were “young adults.”

Reflection • “World AIDS Day, on the first of December each year, offers an opportunity for reflection.” So begins a “joint statement for World AIDS Day” issued by ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Han-

son and Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori. I actually find opportunities for reflection most every day, but I'm glad December 1 offers their graces a particular opportunity. At least World AIDS Day didn't supplant the first Sunday of Advent this year — though the fact that it happened on “the eve of Advent” allowed the bishops to piggyback on Advent themes, praising “the God who exalts the humble, meek, hungry, and sick.” I hadn't heard it put quite that way before; usually we speak of God “healing” the sick rather than “exalting” the sick. But I suppose in the bishops' view, the healing part really devolves on us, and so they followed it up with the usual instructions to President Obama and to the government in general. They also resolved to “look for ways where we can partner to heal humanity of HIV and AIDS.” Good to know they're working on that, seeing as how Lutheran youth from across the globe are busy with climate change. I'm all for these joint statements, though. It cuts in half the number of insipidly silly documents floating around out there. I just worry that PB Hanson will decide that he's getting the short end of things when he just gets to sign as

“The Rev.” whereas she is “The Most Rev.”; furthermore, he’s only the “Presiding Bishop” while she gets to be the “Presiding Bishop and Primate.” I mean, it hardly seems fair. On the other hand, God does exalt the humble and meek.

LCMS ecumenism • Dr. Albert Collver is Director of Church Relations and assistant to LCMS President Harrison. He posted an interesting piece on a blog that features various LCMS leaders’ comments (wmltblog.org). It was an account of his recent visit in Slovakia, where he met with the General Bishop of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia. In telling about this church, Dr. Collver had to say something about why LCMS is hobnobbing with a church that ordains women (which includes not only the Slovakian church, but several others in Central Europe and Africa). “If the view of Scripture in these churches is similar or nearly identical to that of the Missouri Synod, why did these churches ordain women?” he asks, and then goes on to answer: “In a general way, the answer can be described as the result of pragmatic reasons (extreme isolation under Communism and a shortage of men), decades of exposure to atheism, and the egalitarian social justice doctrine of the contemporary world that seeks to remove all gender distinctions.” He concludes his comment on the issue by saying that although “there are differences that may prevent the Missouri Synod from entering into pulpit and altar fellowship, it is also important for the Missouri Synod to engage in conversation where we are able to do so – for the mutual benefit of all involved, as we seek to confess the truth of the

Reformation to the world.” Good to know.

Church signs • I weary quickly of church sign humor, but once in a while something really stunning comes along. Someone sent me a photo of what is apparently the church sign of First Lutheran Church (ELCA) in South Sioux City, NE. The caption reads: “Bored? Try a missionary position.” Yes, stunning, and in remarkably bad taste. How do you suppose it worked as an evangelism tool in Nebraska?

A sign of the times? • The unexpected resignation of Richard Bliese as President of Luther Seminary seems to have caught everyone off guard. It was announced at an all-campus meeting on December 10, and confirmed in an ELCA news release the next day. A few days before, students at Luther had been told that the seminary is facing some serious financial issues, apparently brought to light by a new interim CFO. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* has reported that the school lost some \$4 million last year, and that enrollment is declining (though both points seem a bit overstated). To what extent that can be blamed on the president is a question, but there is that “the buck stops here” reality. Bliese has been popular with students, but at least some faculty have been having “issues” with him for some time now (certainly not that unusual in academia). Rick Foss, Luther’s Director of Contextual Learning, will serve as interim president. One question a lot of people are asking: If Luther, long reputed to be the most fiscally sound of the ELCA seminaries, is in financial trouble, what’s going on at the rest of them?

– roj

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