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In the desert



The Gospel tells us what came as the result of Jesus' fast in the desert—his temptation by the devil. Its place in our Lord's life is at the beginning of the messianic activity. Before he begins to announce the kingdom of God has come in his person, before he begins to preach, he prays. . . . Before he mingles with the multitude, he enters the solitude. Before he seeks out men and women, he first seeks the face of his Father in heaven. And he fasts. . . . Jesus goes into the desert . . . [where] he leaves behind everything else that a man needs even for bare existence, so that for this once not just in the depths of his heart but in the whole range of his being he can do and say what is the first and last duty of humankind—to find God, to seek God, to belong to God to the exclusion of everything else that makes up human life. And therefore he fasts. Therefore through this cruelly hard act, this denial of all comfort, this refusal of food and drink, through the solitude and abandonment of the desert, through everything else that involves a rejection, a self-denial of the world and all earthly company, through all these he proclaims this fact: one thing only is necessary, that I be with God, that I find God, and everything else, no matter how great or beautiful, is secondary and subordinate and must be sacrificed, if needs be, to this ultimate movement of heart and spirit. —Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations* (Crossroad, 1993).

Great expectations



In the January issue of *The Lutheran* there appeared a "My View" column by Ronald F. Christian, who is identified as a retired pastor and a former assistant to the bishop of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod. Entitled "Why do they leave? Church defections a puzzle," Christian wonders just why congregations are leaving the ELCA.

He's certainly entitled to wonder, and it is important to note that "My View" gives wide latitude to ELCA members who want to write about most anything; it's *The Lutheran's* "op ed" feature, so to speak. *The Lutheran* itself describes the feature as "an edgy opinion column." As often as not, it seems, the writers actually fall off the edge. In this piece, Pr. Christian is perplexed about why congregations vote to leave the ELCA. It's kind of startling that anyone would wonder that; even if one supports wholeheartedly the decisions and directions of the ELCA, it isn't that difficult to discern why people and congregations might have a different view, and why that might compel them to leave. Pr. Christian seems to think it has to do with "the ego needs of the leaders" or a "closed theology"—an opinion which falls somewhere between uncharitable

and obtuse, in my opinion – as does his presumption that leaving the ELCA is “to depart from the broad and global Lutheran family.”

But one sentence in his perplexed article really perplexed me, and not only me. “The ELCA,” he wrote, “requires nothing of congregations.” His point seems to be that since the ELCA “requires nothing,” congregations have no reason to leave.

Wrong on many levels

Wow. Let’s start with the fact that, at least on one level, his statement is patently false. The ELCA requires quite a few things of congregations. Many sections of the model constitution for congregations are “required.” Congregations are “required” to call only pastors who are on the clergy roster of the ELCA. Plenty of other things are “required,” though admittedly without much consequence if the congregation just says “no.”

But there’s more to it than that. I don’t much care for the language of “requirement” – seems a pretty un-Lutheran concept to me. But let’s put it this way: Does the ELCA “expect” anything of congregations? And if you put it that way, I would hope Pr. Christian would agree that the ELCA expects a good deal.

Expecting faithfulness

It expects congregations to be faithful to the gospel. It isn’t a “requirement” in the strict sense, but that seems a distinction without much difference. There’s no legal “requirement” that a husband be faithful to his wife, but most wives (and, one hopes, most husbands) have an “expectation” that this will be the case. That is a mutual expectation, and that’s how it is in the church as well; congregations expect faithfulness of their denomination, or they should. So if a congregation or an individual believes that the denomination is not being faithful, why wouldn’t they leave? And if the denomination believes a congregation is being unfaithful, why would they stand for it?

The ELCA expects congregations to support, in prayer and giving, the mission of the church. The ELCA expects congregations to offer Word and Sacrament on a regular basis. The ELCA expects congregations to participate at least minimally in the life of their synod. These expectations are not always met, but they are expectations nonetheless.

And they should be. I’ve always found puzzling the idea that some people elect not to participate in the life of a congregation – infrequent worship, minimal financial support, absolutely no other involvement – and yet they insist that they be considered “members in good standing.” If they don’t want their church to expect anything of them, why bother?

The tie that binds

I expect my church to have expectations of me (and maybe even requirements). What kind of relationship is it when we don’t have expectations of those we love? It is precisely those expectations that help keep us on track, and that nurture those blessed ties that bind.

Twenty years ago or so Gilbert Meilaender wrote an article in *First Things* entitled “I Want to Burden My Loved Ones.” He was referring to a reason people often give for making advance directives about health care; they want to specify various things in advance because they don’t want to “burden” their family with making those decisions. (Today one often hears similar reasons offered for purchasing long term care insurance.) Meilaender’s point was not really about advance directives, but about the whole concept of being a burden. When we love someone, the beloved must sometimes be a burden, and we carry it joyfully. That’s part of what love is.

And love also involves expectations – not a popular idea in our culture right now, where love still seems to mean never having to say you’re sorry. But when we love one another, we expect things of one another. It’s part of that whole covenant thing.

The real question

I hope my church body has great expectations of me, and of the congregation of which I am a part. If it doesn’t, the question isn’t “why would I leave?” but “why would I stay?”

So to say that my church “expects nothing of me” or “requires nothing of me” is just about the most wrong-headed thing I can imagine. If my church has no expectations of me, then – to paraphrase Flannery O’Conner’s famous comment about the Eucharist if it is merely a symbol – “to hell with it.”

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

The gift of perseverance

By Peter C. Garrison



My wife and I were sitting in the living room reading by the fire. She looked up at me and said, "I feel as though we are riding in a cavalry charge and people are getting shot out of their saddles all around us. Are we going to make it?"

We had just learned that another couple was going through a divorce—20 years, and "poof"! We had just learned that a former bishop had renounced a lifetime of faith and died favoring the Yoko Ono-inspired Lennon dirge "Imagine." I had just heard from an old friend with a long Christian marriage who was contemplating an affair, asking me the question, "Don't I deserve to be happy?"

I thought, "No, you don't deserve to be happy. You need to persevere in your duty as a Christian husband and a father. *That* will make you happy, if that's what you're after."

No short cuts for pilgrims

Perseverance is not one of the virtues much in vogue these days, but that was not always so. In the fifth century Augustine spoke of "God's great gift of perseverance which guards all the other gifts." Indeed, the saint of Hippo's last work was entitled "On Perseverance," written near the end of his life as the Vandals landed in North Africa.

Augustine wrote that one is "never certain of knowing if one has received this gift while one is alive." In holy fear we are encouraged to not only assent to the faith, but to live the Christian virtues. We may "talk the talk" of Christianity, but we want to "walk the walk" as we follow Christ. There is both baptismal and Scriptural assurance of our justification through faith by grace, yet the sanctification of our lives is a process to be lived, not merely a declaration to believe.

To persevere is to continue in faith until the end of life. The *when* of beginning to follow Christ is not as important as its continuance. "One would do well to attribute perseverance to the one who has lived one year in the faith before dying, or as short a time as you might imagine, than to the one who has lived many years faithfully, but stumbles in his faith just before he dies," Augustine wrote. We can re-

member the good thief on his cross next to our Lord; he may have persevered in the faith for only an hour but it was that final mortal hour before his entrance into Paradise. [The quotes from Augustine in this essay are all my own translations, working from *Philosophie, catéchèse, polémique Oeuvres III*, ed. Lucian Jerphagnon, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, 2002.]

Helps in our perseverance

Augustine found a key to perseverance in the Lord's Prayer, which "asks for almost nothing other than perseverance." He followed closely Cyprian of Carthage's third century exposition of the prayer, and that tradition would strongly influence Luther's treatment in the *Small Catechism*. In reflecting on Augustine's work, we might find six "helps" in our struggle to persevere.

In discussing the first petition, "Hallowed be thy Name," Augustine notes that God is not made holy by our calling God holy. But in following the commandment to "Be holy as I am holy" (Lv. 19.8), we ask that, as we have begun our journey in baptism, "so may we persevere in what we have begun to be." So the first help is to understand that in our baptism, we remember who we are and Who loves us. This *re-cognition* of our very self can help us hold onto this baptismal gift in times of weariness, temptation and tribulation. To strengthen this awareness, Luther suggested keeping a shell with water next to one's night table, so that upon wakening, one may make the sign of the Cross on one's head before even getting out of bed.

Continual prayer

A second help is added to this existential awareness of our very identity as God's children in the practical application of thanksgiving through a pious religious life: "We address ourselves to God in continual prayer, we implore God day and night that our sanctification and lives full of grace may be kept safe by His protection." Regular times of prayer in the home, at work, alone or with friends can strengthen our will to persevere.

A third help in our persevering is the nam-

ing of the virtues we would keep: “. . . as a saint would ask God to be a saint and for the truth to remain saintly, so would the chaste ask to remain chaste, the just to be just, the pious to be pious . . .” We count our blessings, naming them and seeing to their practice in a thankful life.

Carrot and stick

Augustine’s explanation of the second petition, “Thy kingdom come,” will sound familiar to Lutherans from the *Small Catechism*. “Is this not asking nothing more,” Augustine asks, “but that this kingdom – which comes to all the saints – may come to us as well?” Augustine ties this to perseverance by noting that the “kingdom of God doesn’t come otherwise: it will come certainly to those who will have persevered until the end and not to the others.” We want this prize, and so we continue the race.

The third petition, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” provides a fourth help. Cyprian and Augustine give both a spiritual carrot and a stick to keep us motivated in our pilgrimage in spite of our mulish nature. “Since [God’s kingdom] is already accomplished in [us], why still ask for this kingdom to come, if not in order to persevere in that which [we] *have begun to be*?” We don’t want to lose what we have been given – our Christian adoption – and we don’t want to disappoint our Heavenly Father.

Just showing up

In discussing the fourth petition, “Give us this day our daily bread,” Augustine notes Cyprian’s Eucharistic interpretation, urging the reception of “daily bread” for the believer’s perseverance in the faith: “We ask as well that this bread may be given each day so that we who are in Christ and receive daily the Eucharist as nurture for our salvation may not, by the stumbling block of a grave sin, be prohibited and stopped from taking part in the celestial bread and separated from the body of Christ.”

This suggests a fifth help, one that moves our path out of a simply intellectual assent and into the physical commitment to a religious practice. In a liturgical sense, just “showing up” for the Eucharist “counts” for Augustine and Cyprian. Theirs is an incarnational theology and piety. The physical act of

regular reception of the Sacrament empowers one to persevere by means of Christ’s very presence. The pilgrim perseveres, accompanied by the Way, the Truth and the Life.

We need help

The fifth petition, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” sharpens the healthy fear of being separated from Christ. Augustine’s view is that “in this petition alone, we do not hear a call for perseverance.” He notes that we beg forgiveness for our sins that we have committed in the past. Yet perseverance concerns not the time already spent in this mortal life, but the time that remains to unfold until its end. Our request may be that God persevere in guarding us from thinking we are without sin.

He cites Cyprian’s writing against a Pelagian interpretation: “So that man is not self-satisfied, as if he were innocent, and not fall because of pride, one is instructed and learns that he sins each day in order that he pray every day to be forgiven his sins.” We are not to fear being tempted – that is part of our pilgrimage; but we are to fear falling into temptation.

So the sixth help given to us is the awareness of our need for assistance in our perseverance and that God is the one to give us this daily strength through the forgiveness of our sins. With God’s grace we continue in the sanctifying walk with our Savior and do not simply assent to and await our salvation. We actively die daily to sin and actively rise to newness of life. We practice what is preached to us, with thanksgiving and humility. In this way even the struggle with sin becomes a help along the way of persevering in the faith.

Raising Lutheran eyebrows

Now it may be that some of this will raise Lutheran eyebrows. What finally saves us – God’s grace, or our perseverance? To this question I believe Augustine would answer “Yes.” The saint put it this way: “[T]he start and the perseverance in the faith are the same gift of God . . . who has foreseen to whom he would give these gifts, to the end of defending, as a bottom line, the gift of God alone; that is to say, not given according to our merits.”

Ah, God’s foreknowledge. This may trouble us with Augustine (who is, after all, the spiritual

father of Calvin as well as Luther). But in regard to this question, Augustine tells of a bad monk who wouldn't do what he was told. The monk excused his disobedience by claiming that "I am only being right now what God foresaw me being." Augustine admits that the monk is correct in his thinking, but observes that the monk progresses in his malfeasance such that he leaves the monastery and becomes like a dog returning to his vomit, never to learn for certain what would become of his soul, and justly incurring the wrath of God.

But "if you ask me still why it is in this matter that God's anger is as just as his mercy is great, then I reply that his judgments are impenetrable."

Mercifully assist us

My answer to my wife during our fireside chat was, "Yes — we are very OK. I thank God for

you, our long marriage, my long pastorate and Jesus' persevering love. Should I write something about the gift of thankful perseverance?"

And then I breathed a prayer that can be found in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*: "O Lord, mercifully assist us in our supplications and prayers. Direct the lives of your servants toward the goal of everlasting salvation, that, surrounded by all the changes and uncertainties of life, we may be defended by your gracious and ready help in Jesus Christ our Lord."

We Lutherans persevere, turns out, by God's "gracious and ready help." Augustine would be pleased.

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Bishops botch the incarnation



I have become inured to the vapid socio-political statements that are churned out of the office of the presiding bishop of the ELCA, and regular readers of *Forum Letter* know that similar propaganda is characteristic of the primate of the ELCA's full communion partner, the Episcopal Church. Sometimes the two bishops actually get together, as on the statement about World AIDS Day, that major Christian feast, that we reported last month.

But a bevy of bishops in New York State released a Christmas statement that rivals anything coming out of the offices of the presiding bishops.

Ecumenical nonsense

On December 12, Bishop Marie Jerge of the ELCA's Upstate New York Synod was joined by the Episcopal bishop of Syracuse, the United Methodist bishop of the Upper New York Conference, and — God help us — the Roman Catholic bishop of Syracuse.

You could sense the train wreck coming with the opening line: "To a world struggling with such planetary issues as war and peace, global climate

change, poverty and wealth . . ." Get ready for a real Christmas homily.

The bishops' meditation is too long to quote in full, but you need to know the heart of it: "The central point of the Bible's birth stories of Jesus was to challenge Rome's propaganda and subvert the hierarchy of wealth and power."

The central point

Read that again, slowly. The. Central. Point. I'm no Biblical scholar, but to me that doesn't really seem to be what I always understood those stories to be about. I guess St. Luke was a lot more political than I really had envisioned. Here I thought he was writing about the incarnate God, the Savior, Christ the Lord. Silly me.

But of course, any good homily goes on to ask the catechetical question, "What does this mean?" And for the good bishops, what it means is "that we are to work for a vision of the human community that seeks the good of all over personal gain. The way of Jesus, no matter how you may honor him or what you may call him, is a way of life for all creation . . . We get to create the possibility of a new

world with visions of a new peace and a new justice that respects the dignity of every human being. It is the sign of the infant of Bethlehem. It is the Christmas hope."

The Christmas hope

That's the Christmas hope? That *we* get to create some brave new world of peace and justice? Even my least favorite Christmas carol, the Unitarian "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," avoids that Pelagian idea, speaking of a new heaven and earth that comes from God, not from us.

But that's about all you get, I guess, when you understand that this story is "the news of the Child born who values everyone, especially the least and the lost." This is the preferential option for the poor, all mixed up with pop psychology. It is pretty thin gruel to offer to a weary world in need of a Savior.

Christmas pap

There is so much pap that infests the Christmas season. I don't have a lot of patience with cutesy angels, Santa kneeling at the manger, that kind of thing. The songs and poems that turn Christmas into a generic call for peace and happiness and kindness to strangers aren't a lot better. (I do love Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as much as the next person, but I wouldn't mistake it for the Christmas gospel.)

But for Christian bishops to witness to the faith by making the Christmas story a call to "create

the possibility of a new world" — well, you just wonder what seminary they went to. Christmas is one time of year, perhaps the primary time, when people are open to the message of the gospel. That message is not about "the possibility of a new world"; it is about the bankruptcy of the old one, the one we've got, and the utter inability of humanity to do what the bishops seem to think we should do. It is about God, taking on human flesh, in order to save us from sin, death and the devil. At least that's what my catechism teaches me.

Opportunity squandered

Perhaps the bishops consider this just too theological. After all, they seem to think they are addressing (as they say in their opening paragraph) "even . . . those of different faith traditions, or even those of no faith tradition." Maybe they honestly believe that their unorthodox interpretation will garner attention that a simple and faithful proclamation of Christ couldn't get.

But if they really think that turning the Christmas story into a political polemic is what will "make Christ known" (to use a popular ELCA phrase), then they just really don't get it. Four bishops, speaking to the people of the area they serve, and this is all they have to offer? An opportunity squandered. And a terrible indictment of the theological and evangelical bankruptcy of the church.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Historical interest • The Lutheran Historical Conference has been around for several decades. It began as an organization oriented primarily toward professional historians and archivists, but in recent years has tried to move in a more general direction to attract non-professionals, clergy and lay alike, who are simply interested in the history of Lutheranism in America. Another step in that direction is the abandonment of *Essays and Reports*, a biennial publication that has printed papers delivered at LHC's biennial meetings (but which has been rather notoriously out of date, with issues sometimes coming out long after

the next meeting had come and gone). In its place will be a new *Journal of the Lutheran Historical Conference*. Under the initial editorship of Luther Seminary's Mark Granquist, the *Journal* will be an annual publication. While still containing the papers from the organization's conferences, it will also feature other articles and notes about American Lutheran history, including book reviews, "works in progress," and much more. If you are interested in the history of Lutheranism in America, you should join LHC in time to receive the first issue. Information at luthhist.org.

It's not just us • If you thought it was just Lutherans and Episcopalians having some tension over offering communion to the unbaptized, you would be wrong. The Southern Baptist Convention officially stipulates (well, I guess among Baptists they don't really stipulate much; let's say the SBC "advises") that both baptism and church membership should be prerequisites for being admitted to the Lord's Supper, but a new survey shows that some 96% of pastors and congregations violate one or both of those standards. Only 35% of those responding restrict participation to the baptized. (*Christianity Today*, Nov. 2012)

Big surprise • With a lot of fanfare, the Episcopal Church's National Cathedral in Washington, DC, has announced that they will begin to host same-sex weddings. Well, that's a big surprise, isn't it? I caught an interview with Gary Hall, dean of the cathedral, who noted that this action "really says something about where not only the Episcopal Church, but the culture is going." Yes, that's no doubt right. He went on to opine that same-sex marriage has the potential to teach "straight couples" about equality and mutuality in marriage. OK then.

More about Luther • The seminary, that is, not the Reformer. I commented last time about the rather abrupt resignation of Luther Seminary's president Richard Bliese, and there's a bit more to be said. First, I may have to amend the comment that Bliese was "popular with the students." It seems that may not have been a unanimous view. It never is, of course, but one former student wrote to say that opinion was decidedly split. "He did himself no favors," my correspondent wrote, "with those of us who care about worship and liturgy by sitting on the altar the first time he preached in the campus chapel." Yes, I can see where that would be troubling. I can now say a bit more about the financial situation at Luther, as well. The interim financial officer, Bill Frame, in early December revealed to the faculty that financial losses since 2009 have been "ranging upward from \$2 million annually." The loss for the current year was projected to be \$2.5 million. It appears that neither the recently resigned financial officer, nor the recently resigned president, were being entirely forthright with the seminary's

board about the seriousness of the problem. Mr. Frame indicated immediate spending restraints would be instituted as the first of "a great many [steps] that must be taken." Newly-named interim president Rick Foss wrote to the entire seminary community (faculty, staff and students) in January, expressing the hope "that we can live through this time together. Some of the realities are inescapable. We cannot afford our current size of programs and personnel. We are looking closely at three major areas: faculty, staff and programs. While there will be pain and angst as we move through this process, I pray we can do this *with* one another more than *to* one another. By God's grace, despite the world's patterns, I believe that we can." He also assured the community that Luther's donors have responded well to the crisis, and while there is "no way to minimize [its] scope or urgency," he is confident that "God has blessed us with sufficient wherewithal to deal with what is before us." The rest of the church prays that it would be so.

Goodbye bookstores • Augsburg Fortress closed its last remaining retail store, located on the Luther Seminary campus in St. Paul, on December 28. This may not make you feel any better, but it isn't only Augsburg Fortress that has essentially abandoned the concept of actual brick and mortar stores. The United Methodist Publishing House recently announced they will be closing all 57 retail stores, including 19 seminary bookstores. These aren't all United Methodist seminary sites; Cokesbury stores have also been serving United Church of Christ, Presbyterian and non-denominational seminaries such as Fuller. The decision is blamed on "changes in the industry and the consumer shift to digital shopping and purchasing." All Cokesbury stores will be gone by April 30. For a bibliophile like myself, this is a grievous trend. I admit that I buy most of my books online these days, but that's largely because I live in a place remote from the physical stores. Back when Augsburg Fortress brought its books to synod assemblies and other events, I almost always picked up a book or two, and I looked forward to opportunities to visit the actual stores and load up. I do find it hard to understand how bookstores on seminary campuses can't make a profit; after all, the customers pretty much have to

buy the books. A sad, sad trend.

Leave it to Löhe • The issues he was facing were a bit different from the issues facing Lutheranism in the early 21st century; still, I think the great 19th century German Wilhelm Löhe pretty much had it right: “Our forefathers had a complete and structured liturgy which was intimately connected to the liturgies of the first centuries. The prayers of these liturgies were short and to the point . . . Today’s agenda writers have never studied liturgics and they judge the liturgies as a pigeon judges music.” The Neuendettlsau pastor was also a great advocate of actually teaching people how to pray the liturgy. “First I practice these and other things with the people, then I pray them in Church, encouraging my congregation to participate at the same time. Gradually we make a success of it. In these things one cannot, at least from my point of view, give in to the demands of the congregation. Demand precludes knowledge and that knowledge is simply not there.” I share his point of view, but there seem to be a lot of Lutheran pastors these days who don’t. (The quotes are from an article by Hans Goebel, “Wilhelm Loehe and the Quest for Liturgical Principle,” *Una Sancta* 22:4; the date is missing on my copy, but I believe it was about 1965.)

Good choice • Speaking of those who write agendas, Löhe’s accusations can certainly not be made of the Director of Worship for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This is getting to be old news now, but I don’t think we’ve mentioned that William Weedon was installed into that office last May (and

he serves also as chaplain at the LCMS International Center in St. Louis). I’ve not had the pleasure of meeting Pr. Weedon in person, but he’s written for *Forum Letter* a time or two, and he frequently makes comments on ALPB’s “Forum Online” (alpb.org/forum/). He is a knowledgeable and thoughtful pastor, well versed in the history and liturgy of the Great Tradition in general and Lutheranism in particular. The LCMS made a fine choice there, and we wish him and them well (albeit a few months late!).

Purgatory? • I always like to give a plug to the annual Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology conference, even though sometimes their publicity is a little slower than I’d like. It’s not up on the web site yet, but rumor has it this year’s theme is “Heaven, Hell – and Purgatory?” Sounds like a fascinating way to spend a few days in June, and when there are more details, I’ll pass them on.

Great clarity • It was only when I was preparing the entries for the Associated Church Press “best of the Christian press” competition that I realized I never got the judges’ comments from last year’s entries. So I asked for them. Regarding one entry, the judge remarked: “Great clarity in the prose. The writer takes something that might be puzzling to the reader . . . and explains the concept in a way that makes the reader think. . . . Simple, direct, honest and from the heart. Wonderful piece of writing.” If you know someone who is puzzled by the state of Lutheranism and who needs that kind of simple explanation, buy them a gift subscription to the *Forum* package. — roj

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