

FORUM LETTER

Volume 44 Number 4

April 2015

Inside this issue:

What makes a good pastor?

They shall never perish

Omnium gatherum

We thank you, Thomas



“Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, nicknamed ‘Twin,’ wasn’t with them when Jesus came.” The first moral, surely, is “get thee to the church on time”; be there when your brothers and sisters are gathered for the most important meeting of the week. And yet, providentially, Thomas’s absence that night and his subsequent doubt will actually serve the future Church with this remarkable sequel. We wonder about Thomas’s unusual nickname (has anyone known a person nicknamed “Twin”?). But are we not all, in some sense, “twins”: real believers and yet semi-unbelievers at the same time? More important is the fact that Thomas was one of the Twelve, a member of the foundational apostolate. His call and responsibility make his absence, in the intention of the writer who reminds us of Thomas’s position, especially culpable or at least lamentable. Leaders in the Church should show up at the gathered meetings of the people of God. This is, at first, surely the single most inopportune or perhaps even irresponsibly missed meeting in church history. The Risen Lord does not put in all that many physical appearances as he does this momentous Weekend. . . . [Yet] Thomas’s requirement of tactile proof serves us because it is exactly what we ourselves deeply crave. “Did this *really* happen?” The reality question is our profoundest question. So we thank you, Thomas, for having raised (however culpably) our single most existential question: Has Jesus really, bodily, historically, in fact and not just in devout wish or ecstatic vision, been raised from the dead? Thomas’s desire is every honest person’s desire, and so we are grateful that the Evangelist gave Doubting Thomas this space and that the Risen Lord gave him this satisfaction. Isn’t the single service of this story the fact that the Risen Lord and his Evangelist took seriously the longing of human beings for the real, the bodily, and the factual? Thomas is every generation’s “modern man,” sincere inquirer, and honest seeker. The Gospel is giving all such people, in Thomas’s person and through his present insistence, some space, time, and respect. —Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2012), 1184-1185.

If only I had known



It has now been two years since I retired from parish ministry. (I can hardly believe I’m writing that!) This new phase of life has been filled with satisfaction — and with surprises, and sometimes in the same moment. All the old saws are true enough: “I’m busier now than when I was working,” “I don’t have time to do all the things I want to do,” etc. But I’ve been thinking lately about what I’ve experienced and learned as one now sitting in the pew each week. These are things I wish I’d known, or understood better,

The American
Lutheran Publicity
Bureau is on the web
www.alpb.org

FORUM LETTER is published monthly by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (www.alpb.org) with LUTHERAN FORUM, a quarterly journal, in a combined subscription for \$28.45 (U.S.) a year, \$51.95 (U.S.) for two years, in the United States and Canada. Retirees and students, \$23.00 a year. Add \$8.00 per year for Canadian, \$12.00 for overseas delivery. Write to the Subscription Office for special rates for groups. Single copy, \$2.50.

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

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

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 235, Grass Valley, CA 95945. <roj@nccn.net>

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <dkralpb@aol.com> Telephone 607-746-7511. Postage paid at Delhi, NY and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address to P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327.

Copyright © 2015 by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.
ISSN 0046-4732

while I was a parish pastor; perhaps they will be of some use to those of our readers who still are.

The first thing I've noticed is how much I enjoy sitting with my spouse in worship. When I retired, one resolution I made was that I wasn't going to volunteer to do anything in my new parish that would preclude that possibility. We weren't going to sing in the choir; I wasn't going to take any regular role in leading worship beyond maybe being a lector on occasion. That has been a good decision. For nearly 37 years we've only sat with each other in church on those rare vacation Sundays. It wasn't enough. I have a new appreciation of what it means to a marriage for the couple to be able to worship together, and I don't think pastors always quite get that. I know I didn't.

The power of confession

I've experienced in a new way the power of a congregation confessing their sins. When I was leading the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness, I could hear the congregation's words, but I couldn't hear individual voices. Sitting in the midst of the congregation, I hear the voices all around me. It has given me a new sense of the powerful reality that we are all sinners, every one of us, and that when we come together as a congregation, we come as broken people who humbly seek the mercy of God.

It probably helps that in the Episcopalian congregation where we now worship, nearly everyone kneels for the confession. In my old parish, there were kneelers in the pews but not many kneelers among the worshipers. Being in the midst of a crowd of people all kneeling to confess their sins is a remarkably moving experience.

Speaking of confession, for a number of years I've regularly taken part in individual confession and absolution — most frequently enlisting the pastoral ministry of a colleague, either at a Society of the Holy Trinity retreat or simply by arrangement. I've had occasion to ask the rector of our church to minister to me in this way, and that has also been very powerful. It is one thing to confess your sins to a colleague whom you see occasionally; it is quite another to do so to your pastor, whom you see at least once a week. I'm reminded of the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council that required parishioners to go to their own parish priest for confession (rather than shopping around for a priest that didn't know

them). It has given me a different sense of what individual confession and absolution might mean in a parish context, and how that ministry might be received by parishioners. I wish I had worked harder to encourage it.

Welcoming visitors

I've got a new appreciation for the little things that virtually every congregation does that make it challenging for visitors or new members. One minor example: our parish has three services, but in the bulletin the various lay assistants (ushers, lectors, etc.) are listed for each week without a clear indication of the service at which they are serving. As a relative newbie, I'm still trying to put names with faces, and it makes it difficult when there are three names listed as lectors and I have to guess which one goes with the person actually up there reading. It makes me wish that as a parish pastor I had actually done that thing that church consultants sometimes suggest: to ask someone completely unrelated to the church to come to the service with the specific purpose of giving feedback on what makes things difficult for visitors.

I'm also seeing a different perspective on what it means for members of a congregation to be "welcoming." I feel an eagerness to welcome visitors, but I find myself holding back for all the same reasons that used to drive me crazy as a pastor. ("But what if I welcome a visitor who turns out to be a long-time member!") And yet when I do take the plunge, I feel a greater freedom in asking people what brought them here today and telling them how much this congregation means to me. After all, I'm not the pastor, and I've got no vested interest in getting them to come back! (I admit that awareness of my role as pastor sometimes actually inhibited me in greeting visitors.) I also have become very aware of just who in the congregation is really good at welcoming strangers. I'm trying to be more like them.

Receiving and giving

My sense of what it means to receive the Eucharist has changed somewhat. I'm of the school of "the presiding minister communes himself," but I had associate pastors enough years to have quite regularly, even weekly, received from the hand of another. But communing as a worship leader still has a different sense from that of getting out of the

pew, coming forward, kneeling and just *receiving*. I have found it to be very powerful, and it has given me an enriched understanding of what it means to receive this gift of grace.

I also have a different consciousness of stewardship. I've always tried to be a good and generous steward, to set a good example, but let's be honest here. When you're the pastor, you've got a personal stake in encouraging and demonstrating good stewardship. Some of that money you put in the plate is going to come back to you on payday. Not that this was constantly in my mind, but there was perhaps an undercurrent. Sitting in the pew, my giving feels somehow freer, more undergirded with joy and thanksgiving. If I had known that sense when I was a pastor, I might have approached stewardship somewhat differently.

Prayed for, and praying for

I applied to the Episcopal diocese to be licensed to perform clerical functions in the diocese—primarily so I could in good conscience do so in our local congregation. The week after I was so licensed,

the congregation added me to their regular weekly prayers for “their clergy” — a list that includes the rector and deacons, but also all the retired clergy associated with the congregation. I wish we had done that at my previous congregation. We always had at least two, and sometimes as many as six, retired pastors in the congregation, who didn't always get the acknowledgement and respect they deserved. I wish we had prayed for them regularly in the liturgy.

Finally — and I think this has been the most surprising, oddly enough — I have been overwhelmed by the privilege and joy of praying for my pastor. I began doing this just as a matter of course, and then one day it hit me that people have been praying for me as their pastor for decades. Sometimes they might mention in passing that they were doing so, and while I was appreciative, I never really understood the power of those prayers — both in my life and ministry as the pastor, and in the lives of those praying for me.

If only I'd known then what I know now.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

What makes a good pastor?



Had *Forum Letter* been around since the founding of the Missouri Synod, then the regular feature that former editor Richard Neuhaus wrote and called “As Missouri Turns” would have had hundreds more episodes of basically the same drama. There always seems to be some spat, some issue, some event that causes an argument, and the argument always seems to involve opposing personalities as much as opposing theological positions. And the disagreements never get resolved, they simply attach themselves to new events and issues through time. Hence Neuhaus's soap opera inspired feature.

Countless attempts have been made to understand the dynamics of the synod, using family systems theory, theological categories, and any number of historical accounts of how the LCMS inspires such loyalty and bitterness, such insistence on “walking together” while seemingly hating every minute of it. I won't attempt to provide a new and comprehensive explanation, but only identify an often overlooked ingredient in the mix. One thing

I'm convinced contributes to the ongoing saga is the disparate views out there of what makes a pastor a good pastor, or even of what a pastor is and what he is supposed to be doing on any given day.

Clergy-driven congregationalism

Missouri is notable among Lutheran bodies for being officially congregational (for all practical purposes) in polity but very much clergy-driven in actual culture. It is the pastors who are members of synod, after all, and who promise to walk together, and it is generally the pastors throwing elbows as they walk. And one reason for that may be that there is an insecurity in our pastors, not as a common psychological trait but as a built-in vocational handicap. How do I know I'm a good pastor? And what exactly am I supposed to be doing at any given time?

My own first call out of seminary took me to a prospective new mission plant in Illinois. Reaching out, being part of the community, establishing relationships, preaching, teaching, nurturing people

in the faith—it all sounded just fine until I got in the car on a Monday morning to drive to work and . . . do what, exactly? Nobody else was there. My first few months there were maybe 30 people in the congregation, and they were all young families in school or at work during the day. I could hardly put down in an appointment book “Monday, 9:00-10:30 a.m. — reach out to community,” or “11:00 a.m. — nurture key relationships.” I desperately wanted concrete things to put on my calendar so that at least during those few scheduled hours I could have the satisfaction of knowing I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. Foolish, I know, but I think understandable in a beginner, and a more common sentiment among pastors than some might think.

No clear expectations

I’ve heard it said that a pastor should spend one hour in sermon preparation for every minute he preaches. And I’ve known pastors who did that, dedicating up to 20 hours every week to sermon prep. And I’ve heard those pastors accused of “hiding in their office” behind a heap of books and being afraid to do the real work of ministry. I’ve known pastors who spent seemingly 20 hours a week coaching their kids’ sports teams, leading scouts, and going to other such events under the rubric of being embedded in the community, doing “ministry of presence,” and other such terms. And I’ve heard those pastors accused of basically neglecting Word and Sacrament ministry in favor of drawing a paycheck for doing what all the other dads there were doing for free. I’ve been lectured about the importance of spending hours a day in prayer for my congregation, per Luther’s famous admonishment. And I’ve known pastors who did that and who were accused of wanting to reprimatinate the ministry into something resembling monastic life, or of being unapproachable, of “lacking people skills.”

There is no set routine for pastors because there is no clear set of expectations. I’ve never spent 20 hours, or even close to that, preparing a sermon. Nor have I ever spent multiple hours in prayer for my congregational members on any given day. Perhaps I should do both. But my point is that pastors, unlike, say, dentists or car salesmen, don’t have a common weekly routine or clear sense of what they should be doing. This means they make it up. And (and this is really the key to the point I’m making)

they all too commonly decide that what they’re good at is the real work of ministry.

A shortage of pastors like me

Pastors (and especially district executives) who lament the state of the ministry in the LCMS tend to be implicitly lamenting the shortage of other pastors like themselves. Someone who reads directly from the Hebrew declares that it is impossible to be a good pastor without firm command of the languages, and those of us who can barely plough through one Hebrew verb without help hang our heads in shame. Gregarious pastors who easily meet and greet people confidently declare that any pastor worth his salt knows all the neighbors within several blocks of the church, and those of us who spend more time lost in our thoughts than shaking hands with strangers hang our heads in shame. Pastors with small congregations or with a gift for knowing names and faces confidently declare that a personal relationship with one’s people is at the heart of ministry, and those of us who have to check the directory to remember names hang our heads in shame.

The guy who studies the Confessions obsessively considers that the real work of ministry, wants every circuit meeting to be a study of the Smalcald Articles, and, more importantly, wants to go home from that meeting having studied the Smalcald Articles feeling as though he’s put in a good day’s work as a faithful pastor. This means he has to convince the congregation that they’re paying him to discuss the Smalcald Articles, which means he has to be able to say that pastors who don’t spend their time doing that are really being unfaithful.

Our own way of doing things

And it is the same with the guy who coached soccer all day and thereby made several good contacts with unchurched parents, developed his relationship to the youth, and led his team in prayer; for the sake of his own peace of mind he has to think that the pastors who aren’t out there getting to know the soccer parents aren’t being faithful, or missional or whatever. The creative guy laments the lack of creativity in the clergy, the dynamic personality insists that what is needed is more dynamic personalities. Natural leaders think leadership is everything and natural scholars think scholarship is everything. It is all very convenient. Since we aren’t given a

script for our week, pastors make it up, and whatever each pastor is good at turns out to be the key to renewal in the church.

But when everyone else gets tired of hanging our heads in shame, we start fighting back, sticking up for our own way of doing things. These differences, I'm more and more inclined to think, present a subtle subtext to many of the conflicts we have in synod. It isn't merely a battle between models of ministry like "missional" and "attractional" or worship styles like "contemporary" or "traditional," or "Ft. Wayne or St. Louis," or "PLI or BJS." (If you need help deciphering those last two terms, you probably aren't an LCMS pastor, but for the purposes of this article suffice to say the "L" in PLI stands for Leadership, which implies going somewhere, and the "S" in BJS stands for Steadfast, which implies staying right here, so it should be obvious the two groups don't get along.)

Good and faithful pastors

In whatever dichotomies, programs, and trendy terms that provide the backdrop for this week's episode of the ongoing saga of Missouri, it is a safe bet that in addition to whatever theological substance may be at stake there also simmers a battle between differing skill sets and personality types. We all need to know whether what we did today was what we were supposed to be doing, and

whether we did it well. Thus, what is sometimes really at stake in our battles is as simple as this question: what kind of pastor is actually justified in thinking of himself as a good and faithful pastor? And that is a battle that all pastors, being sinners like everyone else, think they cannot afford to lose.

Which is a shame, to be sure. And I'll admit to being chief of sinners on this. I secretly think the LCMS would be great with a whole roster of pastors like me, though a more objective assessment would probably reveal such a scenario to be a wholesale disaster. But be that as it may, I maintain that our congregational polity coupled with our cultural clericalism prevents us from reaching any clear consensus about what pastors ought to be doing with their time, which leads to insecurity, which in turn leads to some of the stridency with which the LCMS pastors of various "factions" interact — as though the validity of their vocation or even their personal worth as pastors is at stake. You'd think ministers of the Gospel would know better than that, but much of the time we don't. Not really.

I offer no prescription to fix this problem other than the hope that identifying it may help alleviate it. It doesn't explain all the dynamics of "As Missouri Turns," but it might illuminate some small aspect of it. Worth pondering, I think. But then, I think pondering things is a big part of a pastor's job.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

They shall never perish: a homily for Good Shepherd Sunday

by William Weedon



Once upon a time (a real time, mind you, not an imagined one), there was a wolf. He was a fat old thing. You see, he had it pretty easy. Whenever he wanted to eat, he only had to walk to the door of his cave and look at the sheep that fed right outside. He'd eye this one or that one. And then he'd go after it and with a pretty minimal struggle, he'd bring the sheep down and eat away. And the more that he ate, the bigger he grew, and the bigger he grew, the hungrier he got.

He was a wicked old thing; sometimes he'd just poke his head out the door and howl. All the sheep began to shiver at the very sound of him. He'd chuckle to himself. "Yes, you'd better be afraid, you stupid sheep, because one of these days I am going to eat you, and it won't be pleasant, oh no it won't. Ha! Ha!" This big, bad wolf, you see, had a

name. A name of fear. The sheep had only to think of his name and they'd get wobbly on their knees and some would faint outright. His name, you see, was Death. And Death was always hungry and never satisfied. Always eating sheep and always wanting more. And he stank. The very smell of him was worse than his name or his howl. He was altogether dreadful, let me tell you! He was in charge, and all the sheep knew it.

Stone-splitting howl

There came a day when he was feeling hungrier than usual. He poked his head out the cave door to roar and he couldn't believe his eyes. Why, right there in front of his door, on his very doorstep almost, was the fattest, juiciest sheep he'd ever laid his eyes on. The effrontery of it! He drew in the air

to fill his vast lungs and then he let out a stone-splitting howl. All the other sheep in the vicinity turned tail and ran. They were afraid. All but the sheep that grazed still just outside his cave. That sheep paid him no heed at all. Kept on eating, just like it hadn't even heard him.

He was getting mad now. He came bounding out the door and right up to that impertinent animal. Again he sucked the air into his lungs and this time he breathed out right in the sheep's face. The sheep looked up and blinked as the hideous odor of decay was blasted in its face. Totally unconcerned, the sheep blinked and then stared.

You've got to be kidding

Now the wolf was getting himself into quite a tizzy. "Don't you know who I am?" he snarled. The sheep looked at him and said: "Yes. I know." Calm, at peace even. The other sheep began to creep back at a distance to watch. They couldn't believe what they were witnessing. "Well," snarled the Wolf, "aren't you afraid?" The sheep looked Death, that old wolf, right in the eyes and said: "Of you? You have got to be kidding!" Now the wolf was so livid with anger that he spoke low and menacing: "You're in for it, lamb chop. You are not going to have it easy. I'm going to take you out slow and painfully." There was a moment of silence and then the sheep said: "I know."

The other sheep had all been watching because they'd never heard anything like this before. But the moment that the wolf pounced they turned away. A great sadness filled them. They had thought, well, they had scarcely dared to hope, that it was just possible that, this once, the wolf wasn't going to get his way. But their hopes were dashed. It was an awful and an ugly sight. The wolf chowed down. It was slow and it was painful, just like he said. And in the end, there was nothing left. He turned his rude face, red with blood to the other sheep, and he belched. They turned tail and ran, knowing that he'd be back for them one day soon.

As the wolf went back to his cave, he took out a toothpick and cleaned his teeth and he thought that he'd never tasted a sheep that was quite so good before. Nothing tough about that meat. It was tender and rich and really altogether satisfying. The thought hit him with surprise. It was almost as though his insatiable hunger had actually been

quenched for once. The thought was a little disturbing. Well, no matter, he thought. And off he went to bed.

A bit of a tummy ache

When morning came the wolf wasn't feeling quite himself. It was almost as though he were getting a bit of a tummy ache. Such a thing never happened. He always woke up ravenous and went off to start eating first thing in the morning. At least a dozen or so sheep before the dew was off the grass. But not this morning. His tummy *was* grumbling. By noon he was feeling more than discomfort. He was feeling positively ill. He who had brought such pain on those poor sheep, he was getting a taste of pain himself and it was most unpleasant.

He kept thinking back to that impertinent sheep he had eaten yesterday afternoon, the one that had tasted so strangely good. Could it have actually been poisoned or something? It wasn't long before he stopped thinking altogether. The pain was just too great. He rolled around on the floor of his den and he howled and yammered. The sheep heard the sound and didn't quite know what to make of it all. They crept cautiously nearer and nearer to the door of his house and turned their heads listening. What could it mean? It was sometime in the dark of the night that the wolf let out a shuddering howl. Something was alive and moving inside its own gullet. Something that pushed and poked and prodded until with a sudden burst, the gullet was punctured and a hole ripped open. And something, rather someone, stepped right out through the hole, right out of the massive stinking stomach. The wolf felt like he was dying. And I suppose in a way he was.

The Sheep who is the Shepherd

The figure that stepped out of the wolf's belly was totally unknown to the wolf. Why, it looked like a shepherd. He'd heard of such a critter, but had never actually met one. With a staff in his hand he walked around and stood facing the wolf. And he began to laugh. He laughed and his laughter burst open the door of the wolf's house. He laughed and the sheep were filled with bewilderment wondering what was going on in there. He laughed and he looked the wolf right in the eye.

"So, you don't recognize me, old foe? It was I who ate outside your house three days ago. 'Twas I that you promised would die horribly, and how you kept your promise! But what do you propose to do about me now?"

"You?" The wolf gasped. The voice was the same; he recognized it. This shepherd was indeed the sheep whom he had swallowed down. "You! But how? Oh, the pain!" The shepherd smiled and said: "Well, I think you're pretty harmless now, my friend. Go on and try to eat some of my sheep. I promise you that as fast as you swallow them down I will lead them right out through the hole I made in your stomach. And then you'll never be able to touch them again!"

The wolf howled in fear and anger and rage, but there was nothing he could do. The Shepherd had tricked him, fooled him good! And the Shepherd then stepped outside the door and called the sheep together. They knew his voice, too. They'd heard it before. They stood before the Lamb who had become the Shepherd and they listened as he told them what would happen to them. "You'll die

too. He'll come out in a few days and be hungrier than ever. He'll swallow you down. But don't worry. I punched a hole right through his belly and I promise you I'll bring you out again."

Once upon a time, and the time was 2,000 years ago. But the promise still holds: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give them eternal life and they shall never perish neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand." It is the comfort of the Resurrection that Christ reaches us today in his Supper. Here we may taste the body and blood that went into the wolf's mouth, but which the wolf could not hold. As you eat and drink you have the same promise: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life!" Let the old wolf howl and snarl all he will. We know about the hole in his tummy. We know about the Sheep who is the Shepherd. Our Good Shepherd. Amen!

The Rev. William Weedon is Director of Worship for the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and Chaplain at the LCMS International Center in St. Louis.

Omnium gatherum



Another oops • Another reader informs me that I misspelled "suffragan" in a note about the troubles of the Episcopal suffragan bishop involved in a hit and run accident (February *FL*). I must admit that even after two years of worshiping in an Episcopal congregation, I remain utterly clueless about the various ecclesiastical ranks and offices of that communion, let alone how to spell them all. I don't think I have enough time left in life to figure it out, either.

No comment department • This from the Sierra Pacific synod of the ELCA to its pastors and other leaders: "You and members of your congregation are invited to Building an Inclusive Church, training that is coming to our Synod in March. Two training times have been set—one in the Bay Area and one in the Sacramento Area. Choose the training that works best for you and members of your congregation! The Building an Inclusive Church training helps individuals design and implement a process for your congregation to publicly and intentionally

welcome people of all gender identities and sexual orientations."

Reap the whirlwind department • A participant on a Facebook page for ELCA clergy writes: "My new thesis: The liturgical year and the lectionary is completely out of sync with our world, and is often more of a hindrance to evangelism than a help. Advent, when people are thinking about presents, family, Christmas coming, parties, stress of balancing it all, and winter, we're talking about 'broods of vipers' and how the apocalypse will come and how bad it will be. The Sunday after Christmas we're killing babies or stoning Stephen. In Lent, when people are thinking about spring and Easter coming, we're talking about the cross, and singing depressing, heavy, dirgy songs about the 'sad sepulchral throne.' Meanwhile, the non-liturgical church down the street is picking out topics relevant to people's lives, and giving helpful, Biblical advice on how to deal with issues they're struggling with, while playing music that's uplifting, inspiring, and exciting. I

love it myself, but I grew up with it. I find that most of our first-time visitors come when we're busy with all this heavy stuff that is of no concern to them at all, and leaves them with a really uninspired first impression. Personally, I've given up the lectionary in Advent and Lent, and have started to nix the heavy songs completely. . . . I am starting to think the church year structure needs to be rethought in lieu [*sic*] of our modern world." Sounds to me like he's gone beyond "starting to think." Or maybe "starting not to think." What are they teaching in seminaries these days? (That's a rhetorical question. I don't want to hear your answers.) Oh, and by the way, that should be "sad sepulchral stone," not "throne." Sepulchers sort of call for dirge, don't you think?

Down the street • He's right, of course, about the non-liturgical church down the street. In my town, the local megachurch has sent postcards hither and yon listing their current sermon series, entitled "Simplify." It promises that "we will learn how to unclutter our souls so that we can live life to the fullest and have the emotional, spiritual and physical margin to enjoy it." I'm not quite sure what that means, but it sounds good to me. They don't mention Christ, of course – nowhere on the postcard. The series titles include "Releasing Your Control," "Overcoming Your Busyness," "Mastering Your Finances." Those are all salutary concepts, I'm sure, and might even make for an interesting adult class. Then the series culminates on Easter with "Answering Your Difficult Questions." My difficult question is why a church or pastor would think of giving up

the old, old story of Jesus and his love for a mess of pottage.

Sigh • A few months back [*FL* Dec. 2014] I lamented having seen in a couple of Lutheran churches posters or other depictions of the Ten Commandments that featured the "Reformed" number system. The other night I walked into the narthex of my former parish (attending a community event, nothing church-related; I stay away from those) and was greeted with a large poster featuring the Ten Commandments in – you guessed it – the Reformed numbering. In the big scheme of things, how one numbers the commandments isn't that significant (although I reckon some of my Missourian friends would consider it a confessional issue, Luther having used the other system in the catechisms). But for the sake of coherent catechesis, wouldn't you think Lutherans would try to stick to that system? It isn't just young confirmands who could find this confusing; if I preach about the importance of observing the eighth commandment, I don't want to have to explain that I'm not speaking of grand larceny. You can find nice posters of the Decalogue numbered in the "Lutheran/Catholic" manner without much trouble; Concordia Publishing House offers one, as do any number of Catholic church supply houses. (I couldn't find one at Augsburg Fortress, but then perhaps I didn't look hard enough. Or perhaps the commandments have fallen on hard times in some branches of Lutheranism who are concerned above all about legalism, and so would rather offer resources a little less, you know, legalistic.)

– roj

Address Service Requested

AMERICAN LUTHERAN PUBLICITY BUREAU
LUTHERAN FORUM / FORUM LETTER
POST OFFICE BOX 327
DELHI, NY 13753-0327

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
MASON CITY, IA 50401
PERMIT #429