In a Spirit of Reformation

Breaking silence for the greater good
in commemoration of the
500th anniversary of the Reformation

David R. Weiss
October 2017

A series of social media (Facebook) posts in which I voice my concerns about the evolving worship life and theological shifts unfolding in my congregation – and about finding my voice erased from its place in our congregational life.

I write these words – in the spirit of the Reformation – seeking neither to embarrass particular leaders nor to foment division in the church, but simply to bear witness to the truth as best I can. So help me God.

This document is available online at:
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1. Six months silenced – a few words on finding myself . . . excommunicated

David R. Weiss, September 27, 2017

In October I will have been six months silenced.

Six months since I was formally notified that my "concerns" had been heard and my words were therefore no longer needed. "Formally"—in that the pastor's message came on church letterhead, cc'd to the executive committee . . . and the bishop. That's a pretty formal *invitation to silence*.

In fact, it's been an *excommunication* in practice. Not that I've been barred from communion (although it's true I have removed myself from worship). No, I mean it on a more mundane, a more purely human level. My concerns have been dismissed *without even being granted a hearing*. Lately my multiple overtures seeking genuine conversation are *no longer even acknowledged*. In practice, I've been deemed not-worth-the-time-to-communicate-with. *Isn't that excommunication?*

Sometime in March or April (so said the letterhead message) my pastor shared my discontent with the executive committee and the bishop. But over these past six months neither the pastor nor any one of them has reached out to inquire about my theological concerns or my spiritual well-being. *Isn't that excommunication?*

In early August, some seven weeks ago, I made one last effort to open up a dialogue, outlining my concerns in writing to my pastor, cc'd to the executive committee and bishop. I included in that letter a specific invitation to conversation to all six persons. In seven weeks since then I've heard only silence. *Isn't that excommunication?*

Well, not quite a last effort. Next to last. Penultimate. In the two ensuing weeks I left three phone messages with the church office and sent one final email—all of which politely sought dialogue . . . and none of which have even been acknowledged. *Isn't that excommunication?*

I don't imagine there is a conspiracy (an actual coordinated "breathing together") to make me go away. More like a collective holding of breath in the quiet hope that I will simply take my discontented self elsewhere.

But as someone whose *vocation* is to be a public theologian, to be told my words are no longer desired . . . is complicated. I feel almost like the prophet Amos (no fan of high liturgy either, by the way), told in angry exasperation by the king to go darken someone else's doorway (Amos 7:12). Complicated, too, *because it presumes my consent*.

But in October, as we mark the 500th anniversary of one who faithfully refused silence, *I will withdraw my consent*. I will lay out publicly the growing concerns about our shared life that unsettle me so.

Already I can feel the Wind gathering in my lungs. It's an unnerving, bracing feeling, reminiscent of Gordon Lightfoot's haunting phrase. What happens, "When the gales of November come early"? I'll tell you:

Excommunication ends.

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2. *Parresia*: Baptismal Speech . . . and an Itinerary of the Days Ahead

David R. Weiss, October 2, 2017

For many people—myself included—it would be so much easier if I just quietly collected my things and found a different church. I am, after all, by nature a quiet person. And I *will* lose (perhaps I've *already lost*) some friends over this—a prospect I do *not* relish. So what *compels* me to make a fuss?

Were my points of discontent merely personal it would be different. But they are *ecclesial*—having to do with the way we *are* church, the manner of our assembly. They are *political*—having to do with how power is shared and held in our midst, the way that we are formed for citizenship in both church and society. And they are *evangelical*—having to do with what counts as good news, both for ourselves and for the wider world.

As such, they are matters of *parresia*—"**baptismal speech**." I will explore this rich concept in my next post. For now it's sufficient to say that in Pauline theology *parresia* names the freedom shared by all in the church to exercise their voice in persuasive conversation that tends to the community and shapes its future. *It is the new-birth-right of every Christian.*

Luther's posting of his Ninety-Five Theses—as much as it annoyed (even angered!) the church—was an exercise of *parresia*. And we are about to commemorate its 500th anniversary with great fanfare. Like Luther, I am speaking out with love for my church. My hope—like his—is to open a conversation with the goal of renewal and reconciliation. Because I'm trying to do this in the face of pastoral leadership that prefers my silence, there is no way to open a conversation that is not uncomfortable. Like taking a knee during the national anthem, or blocking the interstate after a police shooting, claiming a voice where it is not wanted is almost always disruptive. *Like nailing a post to a church door.*

Still, because my *goal* is renewal and reconciliation, should my pastor or my council choose to invite me into conversation around these matters, I will swiftly and enthusiastically engage them.

Until then, these are the things I assert, the points that I believe are deserving of thoughtful conversation within our community rather than being decided by pastoral fiat. I will develop them further in ensuing posts. Today I simply set them forth. They represent some of the key spiritual infrastructure for our life together. And they're not merely deteriorating; while we are distracted by all the "fresh energy" in our liturgy, *these things are being quietly undone.*

1. That worship ought to be as participatory as possible. That the place of worship in Christian formation is not well-served when the congregation increasingly "participates" by watching/listening as others perform.

2. That our move to a higher liturgical style has, in practice, betrayed the trust of our friends from St. Matthew's who joined us several years ago precisely because (from among the other nearby Lutheran churches) our liturgy was one that aligned best with their values and their past practice.

3. That we *cannot* weekly acclaim in our communion liturgy "One is holy! One is Lord! Jesus Christ to the glory of God!" without *undercutting* our commitment to a respectful engagement with those who find holiness in other faiths. (This is a particularly tricky and ancient liturgical acclamation, with problematic elements both internally and externally.)

4. That our attempts to pursue racial equity and justice cannot be furthered if we are not open to fundamentally altering pieces of our liturgy that are unwelcoming to persons of color.

For instance, *This Far By Faith* (our African American hymnal) ought to be used, not merely as occasional vocal decoration in an otherwise Euro-centric liturgy, but with intentional regularity to leaven the entire shape of our worship.

5. That our present liturgy—for all of its undeniable festive energy—would be *unrecognizable to Jesus* were he to wander into our worship, and that he would find us liturgically rehearsing a hierarchical style of community that *ends up mirroring the very societal power structures he called us to challenge*.

6. That our Eucharistic practice of insisting on use of a full Eucharistic prayer smacks of a magical understanding of the prayer, in effect binding the means of grace to formulaic recitation rather than unbinding it to the free power of the Spirit.

7. That, after decades of observing an *open welcome* to the Christ's table, we now limit the invitation to those who are baptized, counting on those in the pews to "check their papers" before coming to the rail—undercutting not only Christ's radical welcome but also our confessional conviction for offering hospitality to immigrants lacking the proper papers.

8. That our Eucharistic practice of bowing to the elements and self-communing by the pastor sends the mistaken message that the most holy things in worship are the bread and wine, when in fact *the most holy things present are the people of God*.

9. That, after having been for decades, a congregation that openly welcomed, not just LGBTQ Lutherans, but also unabashedly progressive Lutherans, we have now chosen to be a congregation that quietly invites our most progressive members to find other worship homes. (*And this is a pain felt most acutely, not by those who remain, but by those who have felt "invited" to leave*.)

10. That, after decades of inviting congregants to puts words to their faith through a rich variety of contemporary Affirmations of Faith alongside the historic Creeds, we now unhealthily limit our corporate expressions of faith to words framed by conflicts and worldviews 1700 years old.

11. That, after decades of growing attentiveness to expansive (nonpatriarchal, nonhierarchical) God-imagery, we have largely—and mistakenly—decided it doesn't matter anymore.

12. That, after working slowly and carefully for years to find theologically nuanced ways to recognize the violence of Jesus' death without making that violence part of God's redemptive calculus, we now have a Holy Week liturgy that metaphorically drips with blood.

13. That the response to my concerns thus far has involved a breech of pastoral confidence, a bearing of false witness against me, and a heavy-handed exercise of pastoral power aimed at silencing my voice and erasing my place from within this gathered community of God's people.

14. Finally, that matters such as these—because they concern the way we do church, the way we model politics, and the way we proclaim good news—*are at the heart of our life together*. While our pastor may be responsible for making final judgments about "good order" within our worship life, that judgment *cannot* be responsibly made prior to *parresia*—the mutual sharing of persuasive baptismal free speech within the community.

Having been denied the exercise of *parresia* within my congregation, I am exercising it here instead. **Should my pastor or my council choose to invite me into conversation around these matters, I will cheerfully and enthusiastically engage them.** However, as I wrote in my August

2nd letter in which I laid out the very concerns enumerated above (itself written nine months after I tried to open a conversation about them): "I'm not asking for a public audience. I'm not trying to be a divisive voice within the congregation. But I *am* committed to being heard. If you persist in not hearing me, then my witness will come by another route."

For nine months the conversation has been obstructed. For sixty days now, that letter has not even been acknowledged. If the soft tapping of my keyboard sounds as loud today as a hammer nailing a list of theses to a church door, maybe that's why.

Jeremiah 20:7-9

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3. By Whose Authority . . . and to What End?

David R. Weiss, October 4, 2017

By whose authority do you write these things? And to what end? They're fair questions. Important questions. Today I'll answer them.

By whose authority? By the authority . . . the responsibility . . . the invitation extended to *every Christian* in the *ekklesia*. Many of us recognize *ekklesia* as the Greek word for "church"; it echoes forward in words like ecclesial. Most literally it means "assembly." But in its original context—the one the Paul leverages in his theology—it refers very specifically to "the assembly of free citizens called together to draw upon their right *and obligation* [my emphasis] to speak freely and deliberate publicly matters of life and justice in their city."* (citation below)

Paul sees the church as a community of "alternative public space" where—because the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed freely and variously upon *all*—every person in the *ekkelsia* is free—indeed ought to be *emboldened*—to speak. To exercise *parresia*.

Paul's notion of *parresia*, which I described in my last post as "baptismal speech," might equally be called "Wind-driven words" because it is fueled and guided by the Spirit. In ancient Greece, *parresia* was the "free speech" that could be exercised only by freeborn male citizens. But in Paul's theology, *parresia* is the speech—born of faith . . . blown by the Spirit—available to every member of the church. And it plays an essential role in care-taking of the community and in shaping its future life together.

Ultimately for Paul *parresia* undergirds the church's capacity to embody a different model of community, one aspiring to the "ideal of a political body shaping itself through persuasive speech and not through violence or the dictates of an institutionalized hierarchy."*

It is, of course, a risky vision. It reads like a recipe for chaos. Not unlike Luther's declaration that we are justified by faith. Both claims rest on a conviction, a trustworthy hope, that what seems like sheer folly from a human perspective, is, in truth, the unfolding of God's kin-dom. A place-time-community where good works count for nothing except as gifts to one's fellow in need. A place-time-community where each voice is raised, heard, and measured carefully for its capacity to build up the community in justice and love.

I speak from that authority. But to what end?

Minimally, **as a witness**. Most churches, from Paul's day to our own, fall short of his idealized vision. In fact, most don't even aim for it. In my own congregation at present the power of

"institutionalized hierarchy" (top-down unquestioned authority) has largely taken the place of persuasive speech (Wind-driven words/*parresia*). And many in my congregation give their silent (even if uncertain) assent to that. *Ironically, in that manner we forsake our Reformation heritage . . . even as we celebrate its festival.* It is possible, perhaps likely, that my words will effect no change. Even should that be so, they are worth speaking, because *parresia* rests on the permission—and the pull—of the Spirit, not the permission—or the push back—of the pastor.

Maximally, **as an act of faith**. The vocation of every Christian is to use the gifts given to them to tend to the wellbeing of their own community (as well as the wider world). There are teenagers and young adults in this congregation whose faith I fostered as a Sunday School teacher. There are many children here whom I've led through the Stations of Cross in recent years in Sunday School. There are others, at whose baptism I solemnly pledged to help support in their life in Christ. There are plenty of adults who have benefitted—deeply—from my long years of advocacy for welcome to and affirmation of LGBTQ persons in the wider church. There are many who have complimented me countless times on the eloquence—and insight—of my words, whether offered in sermons, hymns, or adult forums. I *have* exercised *parresia* faithfully—and fruitfully—over my sixteen years in this congregation. Far be it from me to presume that no fruit with be borne of these words now.

The conclusion of Fredrickson's article, written 25 years ago, is worth quoting at length. He frames his piece as a contribution toward a *political theology*—one that takes seriously, critically, the way that power is held and shared within communities. He concludes:

"Political theology must help us imagine the church as a place of speech, where *all* voices are free to make arguments, to seek to persuade others, and to receive evaluation as to whether that which is freely said promotes justice and life—all for the sake of the church's unity and mission and all without the threat of shame and exclusion. . . . As risky as it may sound, because of the hope in the Spirit's justifying and transforming presence, everyone is entitled to speak with complete freedom. . . . Either local churches will embrace this theology and move forward in mission as communities of moral discourse (that is, really becoming churches in the Pauline sense of the word), shaping their futures through persuasion, or they face the possibility of dying away as they protect themselves from difference and conflict by stifling the voices of all the people."*

In my next post I begin exercising *parresia* in this Reformation moment: making my persuasive case for a more life-giving future in our community.

*All quotations in this essay, and my understanding of *parresia*, come by way of David Fredrickson, "Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology," *Word & World* 12/4, 1992, pp. 345-351. I first encountered this article by Fredrickson (Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary) soon after its publication in 1992. At the time I was a graduate student in Christian Ethics developing my arguments for why LGBTQ persons deserved—indeed had the "right and obligation" to speak in churches.

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4. Making Good on a Promise

David R. Weiss, October 10, 2017

These posts "drip" with baptismal water. Let me explain.

Now, I don't think baptism "carries" grace. It *reveals grace*; it publicly calls attention to it for the child's sake, the family's sake, and for our communal sake. God claims each and every child as "beloved" with or without baptism. Each child is every bit as "saved" *before* the ritual as *after* it. (Shh, that's probably heresy, but it's true.) But baptism does makes it more likely the child will grow *into the awareness* of being "saved"—of being "beloved" by God—because in baptism the community announces this to everyone—and makes promises about it.

At the conclusion of each baptism we welcome the newly baptized as a fellow member of Christ's body, our sibling in God's family, and a worker with us in the unfolding reign of God. And we pledge to support and pray for the newly baptized in the new life in Christ.

There, that's where I'm caught. I've pledged to support the growing faith life of several dozen children baptized during my years in this congregation. In my work over the years with our Sunday School kids I've carried out that pledge. In bringing my children's book, *When God Was a Little Girl* to print, I've carried out that pledge. **AND—in writing these pieces, I'm carrying out that pledge. ***

So, while I recognize that, yes, there are GOOD things going on in our church, the misgivings I have about our liturgical practice are *so deep* that I cannot both keep silent about them and also honor the baptismal promise I made to all those kids to support their life in Christ. *I'm choosing to set aside my silence in order to make good on that promise.*

On Sundays we gather "to worship God," which is to say, *we gather to engage in actions that shape us to be God's people in the world.* What we do liturgically reminds ourselves of our deepest commitments, exercises our sacred values, forms our character, and teaches our children what it means to be God's people today.

Here are two intertwined ways our liturgy has shifted—without any substantial reflection or conversation within our community, simply as a top down decree by our pastor: it has gotten much "prettier" and more passive. I don't think either of those changes help any of us—*least of all our children*—learn what it means to be God's people today.

We join in fewer of the prayers, we typically only sing the Psalm refrain any more (the cantor sings all the verses), and we sing one fewer hymn each week. These are small things, barely noticeable—especially when the service as a whole looks and feels so much more polished. And there is an undeniable energy present (for some of us, at least) when the organ swells and the procession moves. I'm not denying that. But I do want to have a conversation about it. Because there are costs involved, too.

As our worship is more marked by formality it sends the message—disastrously to our kids, I'd argue—that there's a "right" or "best" way to worship: *this* way. No, we don't say it out loud, but *we vigorously model it each week*. ***And children learn what they live***. That proper worship involves very certain people doing very certain things in very certain ways (the actual meanings of which are mostly not known). But I need to say softly, persistently, resolutely: ***we didn't get that from Jesus***.

Those who study the historical Jesus (those biblical/historical scholars who try to recreate a portrait of the man behind the gospels, behind The Gospel) tell us that Jesus was deeply invested in confronting the religious "politics of holiness" that held sway in his day and in calling for a "politics of compassion" instead. (Those are Marcus Borg's terms, but most scholars agree even if they name it differently.) A precursor to works righteousness, the "politics of holiness" created a whole pecking order of power relationships and social roles: in-casts and outcasts. Jesus directly challenged that. In his parables, healings, and table fellowship, he incarnated a different model of community. Instead, his message was *gospel* (good news) in announcing God's universal and unconditioned love. It called forth deeds shaped by compassion, deeds that consistently crossed boundaries set up by "holiness."

Here is my deep misgiving about our increasingly formal liturgy: *it smuggles back into our worship the fanfare, the special roles, and the power relationships that characterized the politics of holiness that Jesus confronted.* ***It invites us to rehearse weekly a stylized hierarchical community that ends up mirroring the very societal power structures Jesus calls us to challenge.*** I am *not* happy to say this. But it *is* my honest fear. And I do NOT think it's how we should be forming ourselves, let alone what we should be teaching our children.

Were I to visit our church today for the first time, it'd almost certainly be the last time as well—no hurt feelings; just "no, thanks, definitely not for me." But as a *member* of this church, as someone *invested* in our life together, as someone who *promised* to look out for the faith life of those kids . . . well, simply saying, "no, thanks, I'm done," hardly seems sufficient.

However, when I tried to raise my concerns with the pastor, that's exactly what I was encouraged to do. But these concerns *are* worth hearing. Worth discussing. Worth wrestling with together in the *parresia*** (baptismal speech/Wind-driven words) that makes us church. So I intend to continue to set them forth. **It's my way of making good on a promise.**

* Full disclosure: this isn't the first time baptismal promises have pushed *me* outside my comfort zone. Years ago, when I engaged in several acts of civil disobedience leading to short stints of jail time, I wrapped myself in my baptismal promises, first to steady my own nerves and later to help explain my actions to my family. A few years later, when I replied to the IRS agent threatening me over my principled nonpayment of federal tax, I quoted from the LBW baptism liturgy itself to account for my inability to comply, noting that I had earlier and solemnly pledged to "renounce all the forces of evil, the devil and all his empty promises." Baptism and I have a long, wet, unruly history.

** If you're joining these posts "mid-stream," I introduce *parresia* in post #2 and explain it more fully in post #3.

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5. #Iloveliturgy

David R. Weiss, October 12, 2017

By now I may well be known around church as "the guy who can't stand the beautiful liturgy." Actually, I *love* liturgy.

During my first year of seminary *my favorite class was Liturgy*. I studied it under Gordon Lathrop, one of the deans of Lutheran liturgy. And I was a good student. In fact, when I spoke with Gordon four years ago (and *thirty years after* my single semester in his class), I began, "I won't be at all surprised if you don't recall me . . ." To which Gordon replied warmly, "David, *of course . . . I remember you well.* You were one of my most brilliant students!" I come by my love for and understanding of liturgy honestly.

I never pursued ordination. Instead I've labored (mostly cheerfully, if also restlessly) at the edges of church life for three decades. Sometimes just inside; other times just outside. But make no mistake, *I have held my abiding love for liturgy close all along.*

As a seminary student I crafted the liturgy used to frame Wartburg Seminary's Advent declaration of the campus as a Nuclear Free Zone. A few years later I brought my liturgical understanding onto the sidewalk in actions of civil disobedience in Madison, Wisconsin. Later still I carried it into the classroom in creating group rituals; and into creating my Sunday School Stations of the Cross procession; and into my worship- and justice trip-planning at St. Kate's in campus ministry; and into my hymn- and sermon- writing.

I am NOT anti-liturgy. As a wordsmith, I'm keenly aware of how words can form images that move from mind to heart to visceral gut to pull us as whole persons into new emotional-intellectual space. At its best my writing does that. Liturgy has more than just words at its disposal, but its goal is the same: to usher us as whole persons into new space. *I am very appreciative of the power of liturgy.*

So before you simply dismiss me as "disgruntled," let me try to explain further the anguish and unease that I feel over our present situation. In my last post (Making Good on a Promise) I shared my concerns that our liturgy has become less participatory and that its formality sits uneasily alongside the central dynamics of Jesus' ministry. These were points #1 and #5 out of the 14 listed in my second post (Itinerary of the Days Ahead). The rest of my liturgical concerns offer more specific examples of how these two concerns manifest themselves week to week. In this post I'll take up points #2 and #4.

Part of the power of liturgy is to fashion a bunch of *persons* . . . into a *people*. To foster a sense of shared community. Which is why it is particularly painful to observe that, in our case, our move to a higher liturgy betrayed in practice (regardless of intent) the trust of one clear subset of our community.

Several years ago a group of members from St. Matthew's approached us as their congregation was preparing to close. They weren't looking to merge, but were interested in seeing whether another congregation might be a good fit, a place that some set of them might find a new worship home together. They visited several nearby congregations and—based both on our commitment to social justice *and our relatively relaxed liturgical style* (which, even prior to our current pastor, was a bit more formal than they were used to)—they decided to join us.

We welcomed our new St. Matt's friends with a moving (both literally and emotionally) liturgical (!) procession, meeting them midway between their building and ours. We welcomed

them—a couple dozen at least—into our worship life. (We welcomed their much-nicer-than-ours tables and chairs and a few other things, too.) Today I have enough digits on one hand to count up the St. Matt's folks still with us regularly on Sunday mornings—and I probably don't even need my thumb. Their tables and chairs are all still around. But the people . . . they're mostly gone.

I know some (but hardly all) of the circumstances that drove our call process soon after the St. Matt's folks joined us. But by now it's woefully clear that it was inconsistent with an ethic of hospitality to call someone *defined by his drive for high liturgy* to be our pastor right after welcoming a group of members from another congregation *who self-disclosed that they chose us because of our relatively low liturgy.* Given that we had just offered them refuge and welcome, by acquiescing to a sea change in worship, far from using liturgy to fashion a whole people, we used it instead . . . as a means to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Similarly, but looking forward, we've made a professed commitment to pursue a deeper understanding of racial equity and thereby to offer a more authentic welcome to our current members of color and to visitors and/or potential members of color.

At present, however, we are so wed to the Euro-centric style, tone, and shape of our liturgy that even when we use hymns from *This Far by Faith* (*TFF*, our African American hymnal) or other multicultural source, they end up being largely "vocal decoration" tacked on to an otherwise "white" liturgy. Last fall I specifically suggested to our pastor that we'd need to be open to fundamentally alter the tone of our liturgy if we wanted to craft worship that is "genuinely welcoming to the community in which our congregation is positioned" (both geographically and historically). In response he explained to me the multiple meanings and types of "community," in effect replying that there are many communities we can appeal to without expecting that the people who live in our neighborhood should actually feel welcome in our worship.

Well, that's true. And if our goal as a congregation is to remain focused on implicitly celebrating our European heritage through our liturgy while developing a parallel—but compartmentalized—sensitivity to multicultural concerns (e.g., running a series of book studies and other events aimed at deepening our understanding of race) while occasionally pulling a hymn (or a whole day of hymns) out of *TFF* and inserting them into our traditional liturgy, then we're in good shape.

But if we believe it's a worthy goal to imagine a gathered community that might reflect more fully the neighborhood around us, that might model more fully the possibility of King's "Beloved Community," that might dare to embrace more deeply the heritage carried by some of our long-standing members already—in *that* case, we need to use *TFF* (and other multicultural resources) with intentional regularity and as a way to leaven the entire shape of our worship. I don't think that's asking too much. *I think anything else is asking too little.*

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0. Interlude - On the Cost of Discipleship

David Weiss, October 12, 2017

Friends, I'm posting a series of Reformation month reflections about my church. They're not cheery. I post them with deep reluctance counter-balanced by deep resolve.

For eleven months I tried unsuccessfully to raise them directly with my pastor. For seven months the executive committee of my church council—and my local bishop—have been aware (at least to some extent) of my concerns, but have chosen not to engage me regarding them. At all. Ten weeks ago, in a detailed letter, I summarized my concerns to all of them and directly invited conversation. The response has been complete silence across the board.

This is why I've gone public, posting my concerns in a series of Facebook Notes. Not unlike Luther posting his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg door or Kierkegaard publishing essays later compiled as his *Attack Upon "Christendom."*

So far I have posted five FB Notes. I expect to post a total of ten, maybe twelve, by the end of the month. And then I will stop. I do not have much hope of effecting change. After so many months of being offered only silence, I do not expect that either the pastor or the council will choose to engage me now.

I'm not specifically tagging church members. I'm simply posting the Notes, set to "public," on Facebook. It's important to me—to my sense of integrity—that I bear clear witness to my concerns, but I'm not interested in being belligerent about it. Those who wish to hear, can.

I know I'm risking (and losing) friendships over this. Some who've cheered me on when I spoke truth to power around other issues are disappointed, even angry, now that I'm speaking truth to power too close to home. This weighs heavily on me. Beyond that, these postings may well make me less attractive as a speaker in other congregations—a joy that I do not cheerfully imperil.

So my choice to speak is costly. It is for me, I daresay, the cost of discipleship.

If I've tagged you in this note, it's because you've acknowledged in some way having read one or more of my five Reformation Notes thus far. I'm simply encouraging you—and anyone else—to read all of them (ideally in their numbered order). They represent a whole witness, and I worry that those who read only one or two Notes will come away with a very narrow sense of my concerns. I recognize that some of you may be troubled by what I'm posting and some of you may be troubled THAT I'm posting. And some of you may be just too plain busy or have your keenest interests elsewhere. That's fine.

I'm certainly willing to discuss any of my concerns further with any of you. I have no illusion—not even any desire—to have your full agreement. Parresia is not about full agreement, but about insuring that every voice gets a full hearing. These are costly words for me to speak. It would be a shame if they were not fully heard. Thank you.

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6. Mixed Messages: Worship, Witness, and the Wider World

David R. Weiss, October 18, 2017

I love liturgy and I respect its capacity to form us as people. That's why I cringe when I see it working in ways that are at odds with the values we want to be forming us as a community. In this post I'll explain how I see this happening in two specific instances: the acclamation we've often used in the Communion Liturgy and the way we've limited who we welcome to the communion rail (points #3 and #7 in my second post: Itinerary of the Days Ahead).

First, let me explain why we cannot acclaim each week in our communion liturgy "One is holy! One is Lord! Jesus Christ to the glory of God!" without undercutting our commitment to respectfully engaging other faiths. (Apparently this acclamation is not being used at present, but it has been a regular fixture in the liturgy, and it is an excellent example of why *parresia*, which actively invites the shared insights of the entire community, is so valuable.)

As I said when I mentioned it in my second post, this is a particularly tricky and ancient liturgical acclamation, with problematic elements both internally and externally.

First, internally. Originally this acclamation appeared as a bit of theological "chicken" being played between the priest and the people. The priest would raise the just-consecrated elements and say "holy things for holy people," almost daring the people to think to themselves, "Ah, yes!" But instead they would respond, in effect rejecting any claim to holiness for the elements or for themselves, by shouting back, "*One* is holy! *One* is Lord! Jesus Christ to the glory of God!"

Well, fine, if you want to play that game. In that ancient liturgy, *people did*——b*ut God doesn't*. Jesus never stakes out a monopoly on holiness. Part of the scandal of the gospel is that, *in Jesus, holiness leaks out everywhere*: to women, lepers, children, Samaritans . . . today even to LGBTQ persons and undocumented immigrants. None of these "compete" with Jesus or God, but they are heralded as bearers of infinite worth in God's kin-dom. So, I'm not at ease with the internal logic of this liturgical refrain. We *should* see holiness in the very earthy elements on the altar—especially in an age when Earth is in such peril. We *should* see holiness in the people alongside us in the pews—especially as the politics of human division is making such a full court press against civility.

But externally (in the message it carries outside the liturgy) this acclamation is just as problematic. For the past two Lenten seasons we've focused on deepening our understanding of and respect for other faiths, learning first about Islam and last year about Judaism. While this acclamation was not originally an assertion that Christianity is the only way to salvation, *on our lips, in our context, it becomes just that.* Today we live in close quarters with other faiths. Our children go to school with kids of other faiths. And *the evil that runs amok in the world around us actively seeks to foster animosity and fear toward persons of others faith as part of its agenda to destroy any prospect of peace in our world*. So we dare not let a liturgical artifact of another time and place become an unwitting accomplice in evil's agenda for today.

Whether innocent or foolish in its origins, this acclamation becomes a subliminal message in our contemporary liturgy that makes genuine interfaith respect more difficult . . . which makes the world less safe for our non-Christians neighbors. When liturgy does that, it *misshapes* our faith. And, as a community, we ought to be talking about that together (*parresia*) and seeking liturgical expressions that honor the holiness we find in Jesus without denying the holiness that others persons find in other faiths.

The second matter is that, after *decades* of observing an *open welcome* to Christ's table, we now limit the invitation to those who are baptized. This seems like a small thing. It is, after, "proper" orthodox Lutheran practice to commune the baptized. And, if there's one thing we've been known for in our congregational history, it's been following proper orthodox Lutheran practice. (NOT!)

There *are* good reasons to make the case for this practice. It's the "official position" of the ELCA in *The Use of the Means of Grace* (*TUMG,* 1996) and *A Statement on Communion Practices* (1989). And such a practice reinforces the importance (the value) of appreciating what Communion is about. I don't dispute this. But *TUMG* specifically states that its purpose is NOT to impose uniformity (p. 9). And, as some of you know, in particular when we called and ordained Anita Hill in 2001 we chose to push the envelope on a point where the ELCA *did* aim to impose unity. *Our legacy is a willingness to press the ELCA in the direction of a scandalously gospel-based welcome.* But regarding the communion rail we have moved backwards—without explanation or conversation.

And there are (in my mind) reasons even more compelling to maintain the radical welcome we once practiced.

Pastorally—especially at a Reconciling in Christ church that welcomes persons whose their spiritual journeys may have been painfully disrupted, and especially in a day when newcomers may well include persons from an unchurched upbringing—we are wiser to "err on the side of grace." Whether Lake Woebegone Lutheranism *ever* existed could be debated, but given the realities of our present world, we are far better off extending a radical welcome and explaining that welcome, than a limited welcome and explaining those limits.

Theologically—not only were none of Jesus' original disciples baptized in any Christian rite at the original Last Supper, in fact, Jesus' ministry was characterized by—it was *evangelically defined* by—the scandalously open table fellowship he practiced. That radically open invitation to fellowship that played out again and again in his ministry ought to find some clear echo in our communion table. In fact, one could provocatively suggest that the Lutheran penchant for "good order" (reflected in having clear rules for communion) is a predecessor to white supremacy in that it creates the soil in which we find rationale to depart from the uncomfortably wide welcome of Jesus, preferring to create good order that manages and domesticates God's grace. *We once knew better.*

Missionally—especially as we join with other ISAIAH congregations in supporting actions of sanctuary for immigrants in this country without "proper documents." We risk undercutting the courage of our convictions by counting on the people in our pews to "check their baptismal papers" before coming to the rail. It's as though we believe that America's grace should be more unconditionally accessible than God's. Really?!

In other congregations, perhaps a convincing case could be made to make baptism a "prerequisite" to communion (although, quite frankly, I find it questionable when set alongside the witness of Jesus' ministry). In our case, historically, pastorally, theologically, and missionally, *an open table is the best witness we can make to the God we have known.*

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7. Talking with my Mouth Full (of Grace): on the Eucharist

David R. Weiss, October 23, 2017

When I met with my pastor last November in that first ill-fated attempt to find some common ground regarding our liturgical practice, I voiced my concern that our higher liturgy was minimizing active participation by the congregation. As one example I noted that we'd altogether dropped the use of a closing hymn, apparently to offset the extra time it took to use a full Eucharistic prayer each week.

I said I wasn't convinced this was a wise trade-off each and every week. (As a hymnist I'm keenly aware that something spiritually unique happens when well-chosen words are linked to music, personal breath, and then formed by one's own tongue and lips. *We catechize ourselves perhaps more profoundly when we sing than in any other activity*.) I asked if we might restore the closing hymn on most Sundays (using only the Words of Institution during communion on those days) and reserve the longer Eucharistic prayer for festival Sundays. *Bad idea.*

In a tone of voice that came right to the edge of indignant anger, I was reprimanded for even suggesting a move that employed the Words of Institution as though they were *magic*: as though those few words were an incantation that magically make the bread and wine holy. I was too dumbfounded by this charge to even respond. Now I will.

First, anyone who knows me knows that I am perhaps the single person in our congregation *least likely* to presume a magical understanding of the Words of Institution. Second, in both the LBW and the ELW (likely in the old SBH, too—all 'generations" of Lutheran hymnal), the communion liturgy provides the simple narrative of the Words of Institution *as a legitimate option* during Communion. Third, there was absolutely zero space left in the room that day for conversation about this; it was *as if I stood already condemned* (the word choice is NOT too strong) for having even raised the question. And fourth, the pastor's absolute insistence that there is *no other appropriate way* to celebrate Communion (at least during our main weekly Sunday worship) than to employ a full Eucharistic prayer, *this insistence, in fact, teaches our congregation—in particular, our children—that only the full prayer carries MAGIC sufficient to consecrate the elements.*

And that's some dangerous bullshit.

[Let me remind my readers at this point, I made MULTIPLE attempts over MONTHS trying to engage my pastor in private, discrete, pastoral conversation about these matters. I don't relish crying "bullshit" on Facebook, but my pastor's door has been shut to me *by his choice* since at least March 1.]

In my mind, were we to vary the form of the Prayer—both the length and the wording—from week to week, we'd make it more clear that we're not engaged in magic at all. (True, the Eucharistic prayer does have variations in wording. The point I was trying to raise is that the *insistence* on a full—long—Eucharistic prayer each week does trade out more active hymn-singing for more passive prayer-time, and, without claiming that I get the last word on this, I do think it's a matter worth the community's reflection and conversation around—*parresia*.)

Unfortunately, when the full Eucharistic prayer is combined with the pastor bowing to the elements while consecrating them and then communing himself, these choices serve to support a sense of magic at the altar. (I know some of the reasoning that "supports" these practices—like distinguishing between "the person he is and the office he holds"), but I doubt you'll find

many ELCA congregations where self-communing is the norm today, which suggests that most congregations—and most pastors—find the reasoning less than compelling . . . and are persuaded that the best way to model the truth occurring in the sacrament is to commune "in-with-and-under" the congregation, as it were. That is, with the pastor presiding at the table but being communed by a fellow member of the Body of Christ.

I'm not particularly interested in arguing the fine points of ecclesial theology. I recognize there are plenty of arguments (historical, theological, liturgical, ecclesial, etc.) to be made. Though I would counter that any of these arguments must today be interrogated for ways they may well reflect the church's past (and present!) imperial presumptions. I won't make this as a blanket statement about the whole of Western liturgy, but this much is clear: *the Western project of colonial exploitation and the incipient white supremacist notions that went with it were unequivocally "baptized, consecrated, and commissioned" by men parading in fancy white robes long before the Klan came along.* And we will either choose to disentangle ourselves from that past . . . or we will (yet again) repeat it.

That's a much more involved conversation. And I don't presume to know where it would lead. I do presume to say *we need to open that door and allow the Spirit to lead us through.*

In the meantime I would like to observe several things.

First, Jesus (were he to darken the doorway of our sanctuary on Sunday morning) *would be utterly lost in our rendition of HIS meal*—and not due to language. That *first* Last Supper had its own sense of ritual, to be sure, but it was far from the ornate, stylized, hierarchical meal that we've turned it into as a whole. Whatever "holy power" or "grace" comes to us via this sacramental meal is symbolized most powerfully when we shape the meal—the Word of Promise, the physical elements, and the ritualized motions—in ways that aim to echo the simple, sacred, holy, humanity of Jesus and his ministry.

Second, *we had that shape down pretty well.* A decade ago our communion liturgy might have been a tad more formal than I preferred, but for the most part we celebrated communion the way we did discipleship in general: low-key, sleeves rolled up, doing our work of making this church—locally, nationally, globally—more welcoming. That liturgy—hardly fancy—did seek to accurately, truthfully, faithfully reflect the story of Jesus, and to quietly empower us to echo that story in our lives. As I said in my fourth post, today we come precariously close (personally, I think we often tumble headlong into the field) of mirroring in worship exactly the type of rigid roles and hierarchical power that Jesus called us to challenge. The "discipline" of our liturgy makes it harder, not easier, to be *disciples* of Christ.

Third, I have known a miracle. In worshipping several times with the Spirit of St. Stephen's Catholic Community, I've felt the palpable presence of the Spirit as profoundly as in any other community in my entire life. Comprised (largely) of lifelong Catholics who feel a *deep call* to echo Jesus' story, they openly affirm LGBTQ persons, welcome women priests, and strive ardently for justice together. They typically worship without a priest and concelebrate the elements (meaning they gather around the altar—all 100+ of them—and, as the gathered people of God, they retell the words Jesus spoke at the Supper and trust that the Spirit comes). I can tell you firsthand, *"trust" is an understatement.* If there is a taste to Pentecost, it tastes like the bread and wine at St. Stephen's. When I spoke of this to the pastor, he dismissively brushed it aside as smacking of a very different (and implicitly inappropriate) ecclesiology.

I suppose that's true. *I just know Jesus was there.* And if looking for Jesus is at the top of your to-do list, sometimes ecclesiology needs to take a back seat.

I seriously encourage you to worship at St. Stephen's at least once—make it your "Reformation resolution." When a friend first invited me, she told me in a tone approaching awe, "it offers an example of what is possible." My, but did she speak truth. I'm not saying we should replicate their liturgy or ecclesiology. But it would allow us to see the contrast in styles . . . and perhaps to do some cost accounting of our own.

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8. Raising my Hand: on a Drop-Ceiling Sanctuary

David R. Weiss, October 23, 2017

Now it gets personal. I'm turning to points 9, 10, and 11 from my "Itinerary" (#2, October 2). They're about how, while you can still see all the way up to the top of the sanctuary, we've quietly put in a "drop ceiling" in terms of progressive theology. And my head has gotten pretty banged up.

This post introduces point 13 as well: breech of pastoral confidence. You see, not only would I have preferred to sort these differences out (if possible) behind closed doors *to protect the pastor's reputation*—I would've liked to protect my own reputation as well. We would've *both* been better served by collegial pastoral conversation. Alas, here goes.

By some measures I qualify as a heretic. My personal beliefs don't always color inside orthodox lines. But before I go there, let me get personal with you, too. I don't know who all reads these Notes, but I assume that some of you are among the wealth of LGBTQ persons I've come to know through my congregation, and I've heard quite a few of your personal stories. I've heard *many* of you recall—often with voices breaking into tears—what it felt like the first time you settled into a pew *in this sanctuary* . . . and realized that the congregation's stated welcome *actually-truly-honestly included YOU*.

Well, that was me, too. Not because I'm gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. But because *my theology is decidedly queer*.

On one hand because I am deeply, profoundly, prophetically committed to using my words in the liberating work of thwarting oppression and helping midwife the kin-dom of God. That's *queer* theological work.

But queer also because while I am about as "in love" with Jesus as anyone you know, I don't believe in hell; don't care all that much about an afterlife; regard the virgin birth as a subversive PR tool; suspect that resurrection language is naming a reality far deeper (and other) than a body-come-back-to-life; and consider the notion of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for our sins to be the church's single biggest error ever (and there have been some big ones). Oh, and I believe that while Jesus was remarkably holy, his holiness was primarily *the result* of the very human intersection in his life between the promptings of the Spirit and his own personal openness to them. And—that his holiness had as its primary *purpose* to *summon us*, first in our imaginations then in our actions, to place our own personal openness at the Spirit's behest . . . and then see what holiness fans forth in our own lives.

Those are just some of the highlights. Not things I traipse about with on a signboard anymore than you might similarly broadcast your favorite sexual preferences, positions, or fantasies. You just know that *whatever yours are*, most churches got no use for you. And I know *most churches got no use for me*.

So imagine my relief-surprise-joy-peace to discover that *in this congregation . . . welcome meant ME, too*. And then imagine the rolling weeks and months of anguish that accompanied the "discernment," for which my pastor cheerily congratulated me, that this church would no longer meet my spiritual needs.

Now listen. By now some of you may be thinking to yourself, "But wait, he's not even Christian!" (whatever that means). Let me say a couple things in my defense. First, in my work widening the church's welcome for LGBTQ persons, I have cast out more "demons" than you can count. Second, while my beliefs may not color inside the lines very well, if you look at the love spilled across my life—more than once at significant risk to myself—you will see that I've lined up alongside Jesus as often as most of you have. So before you take "Christian" away from me, at least look long and hard at my life.

So, after that long introduction, these are my concerns.

(1) I wasn't alone. This congregation, right alongside becoming a "destination" church for LGBTQ persons, ALSO became a "destination" church for really progressive Christians (some of whom were also LGBTQ for sure). We charted new territory–*in both realms*. And while I'm sure it would raise a loud alarm if we rolled back our welcome to LGBTQ persons, we've been largely silent as the drop ceiling has been installed on our theology. And largely silent as many of those who treasured that "breathing space" have left. Don't fall into the "All Lives Matter" trap here, quickly saying, "But *I'm* open-minded and *I'm* still here." I'm glad you are. But for a moment *sit and listen to the silence of those who aren't still here*. Do you know why they left? For this moment, let their lives be the ones that matter.

(2) Our God imagery matters, too. I wrote my story, *When God Was a Little Girl* while I still lived in Decorah because I knew that no matter how often I told Susanna she was fully *imago Dei*, the pronouns in church would *always insinuate otherwise*. Imagine my delight in finding a congregation that prayed "Our Father/Mother God in heaven . . ." And so much more. For decades as the "flagship" of the Lutherans Concerned/Reconciling in Christ program we *pioneered* inclusive language and expansive imagery for God. It was *an express commitment*. My daughter, in the years she attended here—even in the Bible readings!—didn't have the pronouns stacked against her.

We still use that opening phrase in the Lord's Prayer, but the rest of our commitment has flagged noticeably, both in how we name God and in the ways we describe God. During the year I spent as theologian in residence at Pilgrim Lutheran, I helped resource their lay-led task force on inclusive and expansive imagery in worship. This is *not* easy work, but it pays some of the richest dividends in our life together: deepening our theological imaginations . . . and empowering our actual selves. It's time that these language/image choices become the stuff *of community conversation (parresia)*. Far more than they impact the integrity of the liturgical tradition, they impact the integrity of our people's faith.

(3) Creeds are to affirm faith, not suffocate it. Even with many progressive Christians among us (and a very progressive pastor in Paul Tidemann) we *never* disavowed the value of the historic creeds as touch-points for our faith, but chose rather to stay in active relationship with them. But we augmented their witness with a rich variety of affirmations of faith—we augmented their witness *with ours*. These diverse affirmations served us well. They recast ancient ideas in new words and images, helping us hear the deepest convictions of our distant cousins more clearly across time. Also, by opening up "the canon" of the creeds, they reminded us that every belief is rooted in its own time and place (and the arguments reigning there), and they invited us to find our voices as well in this time, in this place (and in the arguments of our day). And in

their newness these affirmations stood as critical testament to the freedom of the Living God *who is still speaking*, announcing each time we used them that neither the mystery of God nor our own Spirit-led faith is coterminous with the words of any creed.

Finally, for several years I worked closely with Emily Eastwood, one of the most prophetic figures in the ELCA's short history. We each had our flaws, and we had our differences—some of them deep—but we also held an abiding respect for each other. One of the last times Emily and I were in church on the same Sunday there was a sermon in which the question was put out there, *"Anyone in here really ready to leave absolutely everything and follow Jesus?"* Of course, no hands went up; it was a rhetorical question about the imposing prospect of radical discipleship. But after the service Emily found me in the narthex and said, "You know, David, when that question was posed . . . I thought of you."

Honestly, I'm not worthy of those words on a regular basis. But Emily wasn't making small talk either. Whatever you think of my beliefs, don't presume that the lack of orthodoxy means a lack of faith. Look at the fruit of my life. And consider that just maybe, in these posts, I'm raising my hand.

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9. Three Days Dizzy: A *Triduum* Diatribe

(An experience in liturgical vertigo—in which I lose my balance)

David R. Weiss, published October 26, 2017; written April 15-16, 2017

NOTE: I originally wrote this over Holy Saturday/Easter Sunday 2017. I never published it because the words seemed almost *too* strong. But only "almost." Now, as I try to explain (in my *next* post) why I feel so much is at stake in how we deal with Jesus' death, I'm going to put this out first. It's my raw, reeling, rant over the last three days I spent in worship at my church (Maundy Thursday-Good Friday-Easter Vigil/Easter Sunday, liturgically referred at *Triduum* "The Three Days"). I present it exactly as it came tumbling out six months ago. Brace yourself, this is a full on prophetic testament.

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I *wish* I could just blend in. Odds are my desire to belong—to fit in—is every bit as strong as yours. There is no quiet thrill in my Holy Week discord. More truly a visceral dread. There *are* causes I gladly embrace. This diatribe is *not* one of them.

Almost against my will, risking fracture in the very community I dearly want to call home . . .

I SWEAR—this man Jesus is a holy child of God, a sage-mystic-healer-prophet. He *is* Christ: chosen of God, and in his words and deeds—yes, in his life, death, and life-beyond-death—we meet the living God of the universe. This claim is so interwoven with me—I live and move and have my being within this conviction—that I would die for it. No proud claim there; simply the humble acknowledgment of how central this truth is . . . to my next breath.

And I SWEAR—this God whom we meet in Jesus is fiercest Love. Making justice, to be sure. Toppling powers, freeing slaves, overturning tables. No tame goodness, this deity. This God whose fierce Love filled Jesus' frame to full incarnation, is no stranger to anger. But this thirst for a restored and fulfilled world *is not . . . never was . . . never will be slaked by blood.*

I SWEAR—from the founding of the Earth until this very moment, despite *our* overactive imaginations, God has not once needed blood to make history whole. Least of all—LEAST OF ALL—the blood of this holy Christ. Which is why these Three Days feel to me like an elaborate celebration of *some grand lie that slanders God* and makes the sheer redeeming miracle of Jesus' holy—and wholling—life a mere prelude to the spilling of his blood.

Rendering unto us—I SWEAR—a god unknown to Jesus, for whom Love came even before alpha and ever after omega. For whom the whole of God is Love—first to last, and more!—such that our redemption . . . our ransom-rescue-restoration was set sure by God. Absolutely. Period. No blood. No bargain. *Just. Because. Love.*

So I SWEAR—before Jesus was even born ("in the beginning," if you like) we were *already* loved to redemption. And in his life we see the power of that redemption—*already accomplished*—announced, unleashed, set ablaze. To the world's great chagrin. Yet over these Three Days we think it wise to give God god-damned credit for the world's murderous frenzy. As though by some false alchemy we can turn nails and thorns and cross and blood into a fitting sacrifice for sins *already banished* long ago by such fierce Love.

I SWEAR—it seems to me that we join Judas in betraying Jesus, in our case to a tale that cannot carry the truth of his life. *It matters how you tell the story.* For sure, he dined for one last time, and ventured out to pray, and was betrayed and taunted-tortured-timbered until he breathed his last. I don't dispute these things. But *gospel* is that telling—that type and tone of tale—by which the truth contained therein takes life within our lives.

And I fear—I SWEAR—with all my dizzy heart, that the way we tell this tale these last Three Days, *in fact betrays us, too.* By framing Jesus' birth as aimed all along toward death we fix outside that frame the actual coming of the kin-dom he declared in word and deed—which had no need of death to seal the deal. That death was inevitable—I don't deny—*but only on account of the life he'd lived.* And there can be *no* life-giving telling that does not keep—in *every* prayer, in *every* song, in *every* word, in *every* breath—that lived-Love front and center. Eclipse the mundane miraculous compassion of his life from the very heart of these Three Days . . . and all that's left is lie.

And losing my balance, I SWEAR—the way we fawn on Good Friday over the suffering of this lamb comes damned close . . . to liturgical crush porn (google that phrase if you don't know its meaning—then be prepared to turn away as quick as the images load)—somehow drawing our own unholy squeals of delight at the innocent suffering that squeezes life out of that one chosen of God. Is that too offensive to say? Did not the prophets say as much and more?!

I admit: there *is* power in these days. That Jesus held fast his faith in God, his faith in Love, right through to his own death. No small witness to the truth he lived (but hardly the point either). And that we recognize—and announce—the resonance between his cross and the sufferings and injustices and abandonments that we may know today. There *is* real power in realizing that God's compassionate solidarity and boundless love chases after each of us even to the most terrifying places of our lives. I have no quarrel with these evocative claims.

But when we make them we must be very clear we are *not* mistaking the cross as being redemptive. And the responsibility to be *unmistakably clear* about this falls to us because for too much of Christian history we've made the opposite claim, and it still echoes unrepentant in our hymnody and liturgy, and we dare not make the right connection alongside the wrong

connection and blend the two as one. I hear so many nice-sounding assertions that haven't explicitly disentangled themselves from bloodthirsty atonement . . . and the result is empowering-potential . . . hobbled by being bound to blood. *Such good news will never gallop.*

I SWEAR—the gospel truth is *not* that Jesus' death changes everything, but rather—PLEASE—that it *changes nothing*: **that the world's murderous frenzy does not lessen Jesus' love**. Not even one bit. *Does not unlive his life.* Does not undo the incarnation—or the community called together by this man. In the face of this fierce Love, death proves powerless, though *not* because it cannot kill the man—it does—*but because it cannot kill the Love his life unleashed.*

And *that* is gospel worth an Easter champagne toast (which our pastor did make last spring). But I'm not sure we truly catch the *threat* behind the bottle's pop. *If this man lives*—and you can take your pick between a raised body, an incorporeal spirit, or a revived community of followers (whether resurrection is medical miracle or mystical metaphor or something in between does not matter) . . .

Well, if Jesus' death is *not* about redemption in the least, then resurrection is *not* God's stamp of "paid in full" upon the account that bears our name. Instead, however you choose to understand it, if it's not about redemption, then resurrection is about *launching our lives*—fiercely and fearlessly—*into love*. And we know where that leads.

Which is why I SWEAR at last—*if this man lives*, then that sharp pop of Easter champagne poses to each of us *this inquiry*, even as the "Alleluia!" leaves our lips: *"Okay, now which of YOU is ready to die?*

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10. When Liturgy Drips Blood

David R. Weiss, October 27, 2017

For most of the liturgical year atonement theology (which considers how God "at-one"s us—and usually gives Jesus' death a primary role in our redemption) sits rather in the background. During Lent it comes out of the shadows. And, during Holy Week it positively takes over on our liturgy. But throughout the year atonement is the aquifer that feeds our font . . . and our faith.

So after the "raw, reeling, rant" of my ninth I'll take up more directly point 12 (out of 14) from my "Itinerary" (Note #2, October 2): After working slowly and carefully for years to find theologically nuanced ways to recognize the violence of Jesus' death without making it central to God's redemptive calculus, we now have a Holy Week liturgy that metaphorically drips with blood.

Although there are several prominent theories of atonement, the one that has crept into our popular imagination and made itself at home is the one known as "substitutionary atonement." It appears often in our hymnody and our personal piety ("Jesus died for my sins") and has a variety of expressions. Jesus' death was "payment" to Satan as a ransom for our souls. Jesus' death was required to balance the scales of justice or to restore God's honor. Jesus' death was needed to appease God's wrath at our sinfulness. In each view, God acts pretty ruthlessly—even if only toward Jesus.

Most of us never noticed that. Told how much God loved *us*, we never stop to question how this theology portrays God's treatment *of Jesus*. Just as white privilege is more apparent to persons of color than to white persons (part of "privilege" *is* its invisibility), the contradiction in a loving God killing his own child is more easily seen by those *outside* our tradition. Or those at the edges. Feminist theologians, LGBTQ theologians, and those writing from a commitment to nonviolence have found this theology sorely wanting in its understanding of atonement. So they've looked for other ways to reconcile Jesus' death with God's love. (At the end of the post short you'll find a list of the books on my own bookcase that have fed my thinking on these ideas.)

But this isn't just about wrestling with the brutal horror of the cross or trying to clean up an unsavory aspect of God's character. It's also about recognizing that all theological claims are *proximate*—shaped by the era in which they were born and by the limits (and biases) of human understanding. And therefore potentially open to revision. We *know* this is true: we've done it regarding slavery, women, race, and LGBTQ persons. Our tradition has gotten things wrong before. And it's about recognizing that our theological claims *creep into our own lives*. As persons who assert that we are *imago Dei*, it becomes perilously possible (in fact *it's been catastrophically the case*) that we decide it's also in *our* purview to wield violence in "redemptively" toward others that we choose.

Substitutionary atonement theology horrifically distorts the sheer Love of God, fashioning God as almighty from *our own* violence-prone point of reference. And it invites us to horrifically echo divine violence as though the adrenaline rush that comes from our more base nature is the very point at which we image God. This is no mere theological side conversation.

In fact, I'd argue that disentangling the cross from our salvation is absolutely central in the ongoing work of the Reformation. Making clear the fundamental graciousness of God—and offering our faith (and our ethics) the best aid in learning how to truly love God, neighbor, self, and Earth—such theological work will be the difference between whether the church is a resource for future renewal or becomes an impotent relic of the past. *The stakes are VERY high.*

I've been quietly thinking about—working at—this project for two decades. Many of you read my breathless rant in Note 9. Here's the short: Jesus was crucified NOT as a sacrifice for our sins but because his ministry and message posed a real threat to the powers that be. He was killed for bearing the promise of a new world (a human community founded on grace rather than greed) into a world where the powerful had no use for newness. *That's* why he died. *It had nothing to do with atonement.*

Atonement happens in his life. In the topsy-turvy tales he told, the unexpected healings he did, the outcast fellowship he kept—in these remarkable ways Jesus demonstrated the power of God's gracious claim on our lives. His death was the world's attempt to silence that claim. And his resurrection was the human-cosmic-divine assertion that Grace could be neither silenced nor killed. There are a host of theological intricacies involved, but that's the short version.

I wrote my first poem on this in 2000, which sparked a poem cycle based on the Seven Words from the cross in 2001, and poems in 2005 and 2014. I've written short essays exploring it in 2003, 2010, 2016, and 2017. And three Lenten hymns, including my Maundy Thursday hymn ("It was Upon a Moonlit Night"), which lifts up in beautiful verses exactly the theological understanding I laid out in the prior two paragraphs. When I set up the Stations of the Cross for Sunday School, far from simply echoing the traditional Catholic piety behind the Stations, I crafted a uniquely compelling experience that helps our children face the death of

Jesus as the price of his deep solidarity with us—without any suggestion that it was a sacrifice to God. In 2014 I wrote a series of five short Lenten worship dramas for Christ the King Lutheran in Bloomington that support a nonviolent theology of atonement. In 2015, while serving as their theologian in residence, I led a six-session study on atonement for people at Pilgrim Lutheran, many of whom found it a singularly renewing moment for their faith.

None of this makes me right. But it surely makes me a worthy conversation partner. So consider what it means for the life of our congregation when a theological resource like me . . . is invited to collect my thoughts and go elsewhere.

This isn't a knee-jerk reaction to a Holy Week liturgy that's unfamiliar to me. Rather, after a decades of reading, reflection, and writing, I'm raising the concern (*parresia*!) that our current Holy Week liturgy, the aquifer of our faith, (which invites us to kiss the cross, refers to Jesus' "precious blood on our doorsteps," and features the Solemn Reproaches, *a litany that utterly erases Jesus' ministry and wholly misrepresents the forces at play in his crucifixion*) betrays the atoning power in Jesus' life by focusing almost voyeuristically on his death. And culminates in an Easter service that, while glorious in its music and pageantry, has been emptied of any life-changing and world-transforming revolutionary joy by being so thoroughly framed by Holy Week blood.

I don't expect *any* congregation to entirely mirror my views. But *this* congregation used to afford me breathing space while I quietly did good work that benefitted the entire Lutheran church and beyond. I've asked repeatedly and respectfully for conversation over how that breathing space has evaporated. I've voiced concern for my spiritual wellbeing and that of my fellow parishioners as well. If we're serious about honoring the Reformation and its "500 years of grace," we'd be wise to *welcome* such conversation rather than suppress voices like mine, which echo in today's context the concerns of voices like Luther.

* * *

These books in my personal library wrestle with how we understand atonement nonviolently: Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes:* ***The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement*** (2001); Darby Kathleen Bates, ***Deceiving the Devil: atonement, abuse, and ransom*** (1998); Rene Girard, ***I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*** (2001); Chris Glaser, ***Coming Out as Sacrament*** (1998), esp. pp. 17-49; Carter Heyward, ***Saving Jesus From Those Who are Right*** (1999); Stephen J. Patterson, ***Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus*** (2004); Gerald S. Sloyan, ***Why Jesus Died*** (1995); Dorothee Soelle, ***Suffering*** (1975); J. Denny Weaver, ***The Nonviolent Atonement*** (2001); Walter Wink, ***The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*** (1998), esp. pp. 83-93.

11. Breaching Confidence

David R. Weiss, October 30, 2017

This is the Note I least want to write—but the one most important for you to read.

Up until now I've shared my concerns about the changing shape of our worship—and what I regard as the harmful implications of this and the unhelpful theological foundations behind it. These are *not* small matters. And yet, *this* is the Note I write with the greatest reluctance. Because in this post I explain why my pastor's breach of my confidence ought to concern YOU. Greatly.

When I first asked to meet with him last November there was no secret as to why. I'd already acknowledged on multiple occasions that "high liturgy" wasn't my thing, so he knew that. From the November 11, 2016 email in which I requested a meeting, he knew several things more:

- That I was in a deep state of personal spiritual anguish over my experience in worship.
- That I was concerned about our worship becoming more "performance" than "the work of the people" (the root meaning of the word "liturgy") for everyone.
- That I felt the relentless formality of our worship sent the message there was "one RIGHT way to do worship or, minimally OUR way to do worship, and if it doesn't work for you, you can quietly excuse yourself and look elsewhere."
- That I had attended Compline with high hopes because it was a familiar and favorite liturgy from my seminary days . . . only to find myself "reduced to a spectator at a liturgy where I once felt at home"—and that this was my breaking point.
- That I hoped—for myself and for others at church—"to see if we can find a way to create a rhythm of higher and lower liturgical experiences—accessible to all—that teach a flexibility on worship."

He knew these things because I laid them out clearly and respectfully in an email. It took him over a week to reply. My best guess is that because liturgy matters so much to him, and because he'd already met with others in congregation who felt unfed by his preferred style of worship, and because he knew I was theologically trained and articulate, that he was not enthusiastic to meet with me. But that doesn't really matter.

Forget about liturgy for the moment; pick an issue YOU might face and ask yourself—if you reached out to your pastor in a message that communicated (yes, disappointment and disagreement, but also) an unmistakable tone of spiritual anguish, would you be satisfied with pastoral care that waits over a week to acknowledge the pain of *anyone* in this congregation—especially knowing that next time it might be you or one of our children?

It gets worse. After we traded emails about scheduling a meeting, the next message I received (on a Monday night) was that BOTH the pastor and the music director would be available to meet with me the very next day right after I finished my delivery route. This is NOT what I had asked for, but it was now nearly three weeks since my initial message, so I agreed to a meeting that seemed set up as a mini-summit on worship style rather than a one-on-one meeting for open conversation and pastoral care.

That meeting went quickly awry. In two ways. First, within the first five minutes, as I voiced my sense that our liturgy had shifted in ways that left me spiritually "starving," my pastor's *very first response* to my anguish, was to *congratulate* me on my "self-awareness" that my church was

changing in ways that might mean it was no longer the right fit for me. I could barely believe my ears. This was pastoral care?! Second, as the music director entered the office, he greeted me, took a seat in the corner, and pulled out a notebook. And for the duration of our meeting (maybe thirty minutes) *he said not another word but simply kept notes on every word that was said.* Why was he even there, unless to "protect" the pastor?! From what threat? My need for pastoral care?! His presence insured that no genuine pastoral care was going to happen. (I should be absolutely clear: I bear no ill will toward the music director. A young man in his first position after college, I suspect he was an unwitting—perhaps unwilling—pawn in my pastor's insecurity toward me.)

In any case, the meeting went nowhere. I raised a few of my concerns, which the pastor dismissed so quickly that it was clear no real conversation would happen. I had not expected this complete stonewalling of *any* attempt at mutual understanding or pastoral care. I was unprepared to be treated with such . . . polite pastoral callousness. I finally concluded the meeting by stating my deep disappointment with the pastor's unflinching position about worship style and said that it left me in a very untenable place—regarding the congregation I had called *home* for sixteen years.

One more thing. Since the conclusion of that meeting on November 28, 2016, my pastor has not once inquired about my spiritual wellbeing. *Not once in three-hundred-and-thirty days.*

So I need to ask again, is this the sort of pastoral care you would wish for *anyone* in this congregation—especially knowing that next time it might be you or one of our children?

I spent the winter in deep restless anguish. I attended worship more often than not . . . but almost always left in greater spiritual anguish for having gone. On March 1, 2017 (Ash Wednesday) I wrote a letter to my pastor. Sent by surface mail, in it I reiterated how much I remained unsettled by our evolving worship life. I referenced the loyalty I felt to my baptismal promises to care for faith in our community (see my Note #4). I stated how unhelpful it had been to insert the music director into our last conversation. I asked for another conversation—preferably one-on-one, but I also wrote that, if for any reason he felt uncomfortable meeting with me one-on-one, I'd like a conversation to which we both brought a person of our choice.

I concluded that letter: "If we cannot come to a far better sense of resolution than happened [in November], then we can seek the involvement of the Council or the assistance of others at that point. I say this because my concerns run so deep, and because they are not only for my spiritual wellbeing, but also for yours, and for others in our congregation that I will not let them go in silence. Still, I'd prefer to see whether the two of us can find a way forward together. I want to believe that's possible. I hope it is."

Perhaps by now I am annoying. Or maybe I am the persistent widow (Matthew 18) or the friend at midnight (Luke 11). Maybe I am even Abraham pressing my luck with God because I care about the welfare of the city (Genesis). But to the pastor I am mostly annoying.

Because his response is to not even acknowledge my letter until SIX WEEKS LATER—at which point he sends me a letter (cc'd to the bishop and my congregation's executive committee) in which he reveals that he had shared my letter with the bishop and the executive committee and goes on:

- To quote from the ELCA Ordination Rite to reiterate that responsibility for worship rests with him.

- To say, "I have heard your concerns." This is a *false statement*, and almost assuredly a knowingly false statement because he framed our November meeting (including the music director's presence) so as to *shut down* my concerns rather than hear them and to prevent any real pastoral care from occurring.
- To state that he will continue to pursue a "*via media*" (middle way) of liturgical styles "within the totality of the life of this denomination." Listen: *I'd wager my entire retirement account* that if you polled the membership of our congregation, they'd respond BY AN OVERWHELMING MARGIN that while we *previously* reflected a liturgical style that may have approached a "middle way" within the ELCA, *today* our liturgical style is more formal than almost any of them have experienced in a Lutheran church at any point in their lives. *The "via media" claim is preposterous.*
- Finally, to invite me to reflect on the ways my gifts have been welcomed at my congregation and rejoice in that . . . and (unspoken) to consider all other matters resolved.

That letter, dated April 19, began my "formal" excommunication. Since then, *none of the executive committee and neither the bishop nor the pastor have inquired about my wellbeing (spiritual or otherwise).* In all honesty, because I consider the members of the executive committee to be friends, I have to suspect they've been *instructed* not to reach out to me.

In early August, after several months filled with many things—but *no* resolution and *no* communication—I sent a response to the pastor, cc'd to the bishop and the executive committee. In that 3-page letter I asserted that his decision to share my March 1 request for further conversation with the others (*with neither my permission nor knowledge*) was "a breach of pastoral confidence because it takes what was intended to be a pastoral and collegial conversation between us and *unilaterally, and without justification,* sets it in front of others." Then I outlined the concerns I've detailed in these posts—to make clear that the pastor had not even begun to "hear my concerns" last fall, and to convey the depth of those concerns to the entire circle of recipients in hopes of finally precipitating a conversation on some front. I concluded that letter as follows:

> "I hope you can see that [my concerns] are neither idle points of contention nor minor quibbles of personal taste. They run to the core of our identity as a congregation. They touch on how we understand ourselves as a community at worship—including who we welcome and who we quietly show the door. They impact how we interface with our neighborhood and how we encounter the world of rich diversity (including religious diversity) around us.
>
> "I have twice come to you, both as your parishioner and as your brother in Christ, seeking to voice concerns about my experience at SPR, about the wellbeing of our congregation, and about your unfolding ministry at SPR. Both times you sought to dismiss my concerns (largely unheard), silence my voice, and even (in November) to encourage me to leave the congregation. Now, in the presence of [the Bishop] and the Executive Committee I am asking you to do *more*.
>
> "Consider this letter my '95 Theses' identifying matters of deep—critical—importance to this church, matters worth more careful attention than they've received thus far. Meet with me to discuss them in earnest: mutually, respectfully, fruitfully. I'm not asking for a public audience. I'm not trying to be a divisive voice within the congregation. But I *am* committed to being heard. If you persist in not hearing me, then my witness will come by another route. As I've said each time, I would prefer to speak directly with you.

"I continue to hold you—and all the saints at SPR—in my prayers and in my practice. I trust that the diligence with which I've attended to my role in nurturing deeper racial understanding at SPR *over the entire duration of this impasse between us* makes clear that my commitment to SPR's wellbeing runs deep. In that same spirit, seeking greater justice and deeper understanding, I am yours—in Christ."

I enclosed a short note with each cc'd copy, writing to the bishop and the executive committee, "[My concerns] do not reflect personal taste nearly so much as they reflect a theologian's critique of changes in our worship life that will have far-reaching consequences both for the ministry we do and for the children we raise. Even if my concerns do not prevail on every point, they merit a serious conversation—first with [the pastor], and, if necessary with a wider circle that may well include you. What is most important—especially as we prepare to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation—is that my words not be silenced before they're even heard. Our Lutheran heritage is testament to that truth. While I am foremost seeking a conversation with [the pastor], since he brought you into the conversation, I'm willing to speak directly with any of you as well."

That was ninety days ago. I remain to this moment *excommunicated*: not a single one of these persons has yet acknowledged my concerns or offered me any pastoral care. I did not lightly go public with these concerns. I have just one more post to write. Here, at the end of this one, I leave you with this uncomfortable question.

Set aside the specifics of my theological and liturgical concerns. Set aside as well all the twirling ribbons and bright red vestments, all the glitter of our worship, and the jovial energy of our pastor. Simply look at this: I've now been respectfully, articulately, and persistently concerned for my congregation and I've been in significant spiritual tumult myself for eleven months. *I could be you. I could be any of your children.* **Would you be satisfied with the pastoral leadership or pastoral care modeled here?**

* * *

12. "For I am not ashamed . . ."

David R. Weiss, October 31, 2017 + Feast of the Reformation

So we have reached an end. Good thing: I'm exhausted . . . but not ashamed.

In 1974 my confirmation Bible verse came from Romans 1:16. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power—*the dynamite*—of God for salvation—*deliverance, wholeness, preservation*—to everyone who has faith." Clearly, as you've seen if you've read the length of my Reformation Notes, my understanding of "salvation" has deepened over time. So has my conviction.

In my August letter I shared that I came to challenge the notion of any redemptive character to violence not simply by reading books but *by living for years in a violent marriage*. Indeed I taught feminist theology at Luther College in the Fall of 1998—*I taught the core feminist lesson about thinking too little of yourself*—while wearing long sleeves precisely to hide the dark ugly bruises on my upper arms, because I knew neither how to protect myself from or escape the violence in my own home. *I wrestle with the violence too often placed at the heart of Christian theology with conviction purchased dearly*. I might've preferred to discuss that messy intersection of faith and life more discreetly behind the closed door of a pastor's office, but that space turned out to be equally unsafe in other ways.

Although my pastor's breach of confidence made it seem necessary to widen my response so as to include the others he'd brought into the conversation, revealing first to them and now to you personal beliefs that I don't generally wear on my sleeves, I am not ashamed of any of them. They are convictions for which I am willing to be outcast, because I remain confident they are convictions that keep me in close company to the spirit of Jesus. And my vocation, most truly, is to do *public theology*—to sit at the (often messy!) crossroads of our lives and speak truth as best I can right there. And so I am.

Let me conclude my Notes with a couple remarks.

I am fine. Many persons have reached out to me, offering words of support, surrounding me in prayer, even thanking me for my words. I am fine in large part thanks to you. It has been important—*wholling*—for me to put my experience in words. But C.S. Lewis once noted that precisely at the moment one completes a theological defense of a view—*in that exact moment*—it is most fragile because it seems to have rested not on some objective measure but on one's own ability to defend it. And except for those afflicted with persistent arrogance, most of us (I gladly number myself alongside Lewis) are prone to self-doubt. So your words of kindness and affirmation have reminded me—precisely in the moments I needed it most—that a whole cloud of witnesses surround me. Thank you.

This has never been much about me. As I said at the start, if this were just a matter of personal difference, I'd have quietly said my farewells and moved on. But the things that alarm me, particularly the sharp shifts in the theological "infrastructure" of our community that sit behind the changes in our worship, *will* impact ongoing faith formation for both adults and children in our congregation. These are *not* small matters. They may not play out within a year or two, but over a decade or longer—and despite all the "fresh energy" currently in our midst—these things *will* fundamentally produce a whole different faith community than many of us had chosen to be. *And it is happening without any transparent conversation*. I find that lamentable, perhaps least of all for myself . . . and most of all, for the least of these among us: those whose voices are newest or most uncertain. In "going public" with my concerns I am, as it were, taking one for the team.

What comes next at church? That isn't really up to me. I continue to desire reconciliation—some possibility to "repair the breach" (Isaiah 58:12). But I don't honestly expect that. Were my pastor, the executive committee, the church council, or even some circle of lay persons to invite me into further conversation—to actually begin an experiment in *parresia*—I'd be delighted. But I also recognize that the character of a church does ebb and flow over time. It may well be that our church's chapter at the vanguard of progressive Lutheranism may be at an end. If so, I will find another place to be fed, another community to sojourn with. I just wish that we had ended this chapter more honestly—and with some form of mutual conversation. I think many people still honestly believe we're moving in the same direction because there is no open conversation about the shifting theological infrastructure. But I had my say this month. And prophetic speech isn't measured by if effectiveness, but by its faithfulness. By that standard, too, I am not ashamed.

What comes next for me? I am perhaps *a bit* "exposed." As someone who earns a significant portion of my (pretty insignificant) income by speaking at churches, were I to be put—even informally, by word of mouth—on a "watch list" within the Metro area synods, it could hamper my work. But I knew that from the moment I went public, so I'm not financially anxious. In all honesty, I'm motivated so much more by the meaning of the work I do than by its

remuneration, that I'm blessed to be married to a woman whose income sustains us and whose spirit is of boundless joy. (Unless/until I'm asked to stop) I'll continue to help facilitate conversations around racial awareness in my church; that commitment remains, independent of worship life.

Also, I'm scheduled (pending sufficient enrollment) to teach a 4-week intensive course at Hamline in January on "Sex Talk in the Sanctuary: Christianity Naked & Unashamed." And I'll lead a retreat on a similar theme for Lutheran Campus Ministry in February: "Called to be Bodied: The Nexus of God, Grace, and Good Sex." I'll continue to hone my presentations on Christian spirituality and climate change as well. If you know of churches (or colleges) looking for speakers on either theme please connect me!

An open question. Quite apart from my argument with my pastor, in these Notes I've expounded a pretty wide-ranging public theology of congregational life. From *parresia* to liturgy to Eucharist to atonement, I've put a lot of my personal beliefs out there. It occurs to me that there might be interest among some in coming together NOT to discuss the situation at my church, but simply to engage in forward-thinking conversation around some of the ideas I've introduced here. **IF you would be interested in that, please let me know in a comment below or in a private message.** If there's sufficient interest, I'll see about hosting a "*parresia*-potluck public theology conversation" at my home.

Finally, integrity. In one of the last conversations I had with a respected colleague before beginning these posts, I lamented, "there just doesn't seem to be much integrity in silence . . . no matter how much easier that might be." My concerns ran too deep—and reached far beyond myself. I was expressly clear for six months that I regarded discrete pastoral conversation as the best path forward. But my pastor adamantly refused. That's why I ultimately laid my concerns before the bishop and the council leadership. Still, no one responded to my concerns—not a word. Only then did I find myself asking, *What now?* Do I approach the whole council? Do I reach out to council members one by one? Do I say, "you've done enough, let it go now"? Or, in the spirit of that first Reformation, do I post my concerns on "the church door" of Facebook? I concluded to my friend, "I'm not sure there's a singular right option. *But silence is a singular wrong option*."

So I made my choice. Alongside Martin Luther and with my own confirmation verse on my lips, I affirm, "I am *not* ashamed of the gospel, it is the dynamite of God to bring deliverance and wholeness to everyone who has faith. I've made my case. Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God."

* * *