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Theological Observer

A Devotion on Luke 18:1-8

The following devotion was given at the Fall Faculty Forum of Concordia Theological Seminary on September 3, 2015. The Editors.

“But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” This question came up toward the end of a conversation I was having with Peter Scaer earlier this summer, lamenting as we were one crushing defeat after another in which, among countless other setbacks, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex “marriage.” The gist of our conversation was that things in America seem poised to go from bad to worse, and we in the church along with it. This passage resonated with me during a recent trip as I watched crowds of Muslim worshippers bowing and scraping at a makeshift mosque at the airport in Lagos, Nigeria, in 90 degree heat, or slightly earlier that evening when a corrupt official bilked me of sixty dollars to have my passport stamped so I could leave the country. Early the next morning in Paris, I saw more Muslims bowing and scraping toward Mecca on the airport floor, all this while I was in transit and so unable to worship at my home congregation. To compensate somewhat, I read David Scaer’s *Discourses in Matthew*, holding the book in such a way that a woman wearing a hijab could not help but see the icon of Jesus on the book’s front cover. It was, admittedly, a minor consolation, and ineffective at that. One could hardly call my behavior a suitable witness to Christ under the circumstances. But what is one to do? From our perspective, such people seem nearly unreachable.

“But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” The question would seem to require the answer: no, he shall not. Faith in this world, where is it? Certainly not in the fanaticism of a virulent Islam, making its way into Europe, then across the Atlantic to once heavily Lutheranized cities such as Detroit, Michigan, where my flight took me into the United States, then on to Fort Wayne. Certainly not in America, where even definitive proof that Planned Parenthood traffics in baby body parts is met by callous indifference. And so-called same-sex “marriage.” Let’s not even go there. This is a prospect now almost too painful to imagine. But we can’t hide our heads in the sand forever. Something must give soon, it seems, and it doesn’t look pretty, nor does it seem things will go our way, the church’s way.

“But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” was a favorite verse of Martin Luther’s. Clearly Luther answered Jesus’ question

in the negative. Let one of perhaps a dozen passages identified in the index volume of the American Edition of *Luther's Works* suffice: he lumps Luke 18:8 with other texts of doom and destruction, such as 1 Thessalonians 5:2 ("the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night"). Luther writes:

These are terrifying statements. But the smug and ungrateful world, the despiser of all the promises and threats of God, abounds with every kind of iniquity and daily becomes more and more corrupt. Now that the rule of the popes, who have ruled the world solely through the fear of punishment, is over, men, through their contempt of the sound doctrine, all but degenerate into brutes and beasts. The number of holy and godly preachers is on the decline. All men yield to their desires. . . . Furthermore, Christ Himself has foretold these developments, and so it is impossible for us to believe that He has lied. But if the first world, which had so large a number of most excellent patriarchs, became so pitifully depraved, how much more should we fear when the feebleness of our nature is so great? Therefore, may the Lord grant that in faith and in the confession of His Son Jesus Christ we may as quickly as possible be gathered to those fathers and die within twenty years, so that we may not see those terrible woes and afflictions, both spiritual and physical, of the last time. Amen. (AE 1:336)

Luther says, then, that it is simply best to "die within twenty years" than "face these things." But despite such pessimism—both our own and the sainted Dr. Luther's—our Lord's question was intended originally to sum up the admirable pluck of that importunate widow who wouldn't take "No" for an answer from that corrupt judge who forthrightly admits that he neither fears God nor respects men. What gets him to yield is the unpleasant prospect of that woman shattering his blissful repose by her incessant demands for justice. "Finally she'll come and beat me down," the ESV says. But, as is usually the case, the original Greek is far more expressive: "she'll come and brow beat me," BDAG suggests—or even, "she'll come and give me a black eye [*ὄπωπιάζει*]!" That's why he yields. But there the comparison stops: "And shall not the true God dispense justice for the sake of his elect who cry out to him night and day, and shall he delay over them? I tell you that he shall wreak vengeance for them in haste!"

I take that to be a promise. So when the Son of Man comes he will indeed find faith on earth. Consider that when Christ visits his churches each Lord's Day he finds his elect gathered who do indeed cry out to him day and night. Jesus says here that God won't "delay over them." Then there is the nature of faith itself, which is more than our spiritual exertions or fervently wishing that things were thus, but rather a lively faith/confidence worked in Christ's believers through the word of God that we, of all

people here on earth—no matter how few in number, or scattered—are privileged to hear. So the really difficult questions we face as a church (and as a seminary) will be met and resolved God-pleasingly—in his ways, in his times. No, we can't see just how God will stand by us in a future that is dark to us, in more ways than one; but he will, just as he always has—in Christ Jesus our Lord, who died that we might live, who rose that we might be forgiven—and beaver on like that importunate widow, with all her prayers and pluck.

Sometimes even we are permitted to see that there is faith on earth: in our students, whom to teach is a great honor that not one of us deserves—me least of all—but this is given to us all by grace, along with all of God's greater gifts; and to be in demand by other Lutherans throughout the world who look to us for theological leadership, and to help them gather in the harvest in other places that seem to us more open to the gospel. But whether the world is relatively open to Christ or seemingly shut to him, we labor on: in good times and in bad, in times of prosperity or in want. God, in his wisdom, has given each one of us a ministry to be about, and he will bless it in his ways. Now it is required of slaves that they be found faithful. And so we are, for Jesus's sake. Amen.

John G. Nordling

**A Statement by the Faculty
of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne,
concerning the Communion of Infants**

The issue of infant communion continues to be raised in various contexts within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Because of this, the faculty of CTSFW desires to express its position on this practice.

- We do not advocate the communion of infants, nor is it taught or promoted at CTSFW. No member of the faculty has adopted infant communion as his personal opinion.
- We hold that instruction prior to participation in Holy Communion is necessary. We affirm this hallmark of LCMS communion practice and underscore its importance to our students.
- Since there is not uniform practice in the LCMS concerning when children begin to receive Holy Communion, we instruct our students to be sensitive to the past and current practices of the congregations that they will serve.
- We encourage our students to be aware of and sensitive to the collegial character of LCMS practices (e.g., what other LCMS pastors and congregations are doing with first communion and confirmation of children). On that account, we discourage students from developing practices unique to themselves or their congregations.
- Finally, due to the variety of practices in the LCMS, we see much benefit in working towards a consensus among pastors, congregations, district presidents, and seminary faculties on practices concerning the participation of children in Holy Communion that are faithful to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Adopted April 13, 2014