

Southwestern Minnesota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

-Bishop Jon Anderson

Repentance and the Cross

Lent is a season of repentance. I am sorry that, in the sad events of the last month in our office, I have not shared something that I had planned on doing for almost a year. I had hoped to make this invitation earlier. Even today I don't have the time to give this summary justice. But here is the belated invitation to a gift for Lenten reflection and Holy Week preparation.

The best book of systematic theology I read last year was Vitor Westhelle's, *The Scandalous God: the Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 2007). I read it towards the end of Lent last year and during Holy Week. It turned me around in a variety of ways. The book, while not an easy read in a variety of ways, is worth taking time to read in this season when we gather around the foot of the cross and wonder at God's passion and grace.

I want to acknowledge that Vitor was my advisor my senior year at seminary. He was my constructive theology professor. We had many deep and important conversations about great theological issues as we read through Tillich's *Systematic Theology* in an independent study class. We discussed the limits and strengths of the liberation theology movement of those days in class and out. My personal relationship may have colored my experience of his book since I had a chance to return to a conversation with one of my mentors from long ago. Yet, I think you would find this book equally helpful. Vitor thinks deeply. He writes in complex language but then our faith is more complex than we often want to admit. He comes at his Lutheran and Christian identity as a person who lived much of his life in Brazil. This book will invite you to think about your "use and abuse" of the cross and more importantly the "scandal of the cross."

In his book, Vitor serves as a guide to consider how historically and personally we have evaded thought about, talked about and practiced being "theologians of the cross." Part of what is challenging about the book is how it strips away our evasions of the cross in variety of ways. As a preacher, I am always tempted to domesticate God to make God more palatable or explainable. The cross in many ways defies explanation. The shocking and most deeply troubling reality of Christ Jesus dying on the cross was so shocking that the early church rarely imaged it.

Vitor argues we need to avoid the two ditches of dolorism (an unhealthy mysticism of suffering) and resurrectionism (where we deny the reality of the cross and the reality also of our broken world). Instead he argues for a practice of resurrection. "A theology of the cross. . . is always the other side of a practice of resurrection, and the other way around. A practice of resurrection can only be exercised in the face of the dismal experience of the cross that in the Shabbat is remembered and thus brought back." (p.124)

The book is full of quotes that are priceless for a preacher, teacher or to deepen your own reflection on the cross and our Lutheran heritage. These quotes come from literature, poetry and theologians about the cross. For example, from Joseph Sittler, "A cross is a blunt and graceless form. It has not the completeness and satisfying quality of a circle. It does not have the grace of a parabola or the promise of a long curve. A cross speaks not of unity but of brokenness, not of harmony but ambiguity; it is a form of tension and not of rest. The cross is the symbol because the whacks of life take that shape. And, unless you have a crucified God, you don't have a big enough God. (p. 160)

Maybe that is what was most helpful. By the time I finished the book I not only looked at the cross with fresh eyes, aware of the dangers of "dolorism, defeatism, resurrectionism, and cynicism" (p. 173) but I was also aware of the greatness of our God.

"The cross alone is our theology." -Martin Luther-

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Sat 16-Feb-08 7:36 AM
Synod Email Update

Bishop Jon Anderson was Dr. Vitor Westhelle's student at Luther Seminary. This review was sent to the pastors of the entire synod during Lent season as Lenten reflection and for Holy Week preparation.