

Chapel Talk: Heritage Day Series
November 20, 2013

Both priest and beggar: Luther on Civic Engagement

As part of our class last Thursday night, the Christensen Scholars went on pilgrimage to the Rare Books Room at Luther Seminary. At the entrance is a glass-enclosed case holding a copy of Luther's death mask, along with casts taken of his hands. Even in death Luther's right hand clutches an invisible quill or stylus. A prolific writer, Luther's hand simply grew around his craft: it froze with arthritis and over-use in a locked, crabbed position. The left hand, in contrast, rests free, open and unbent.

Those masks, one of Luther's face, the others of his hands, are the horizon for this talk. For the words that allegedly came out of Luther's mouth just before his face set in death confounded the people gathered around his deathbed, no less than they confound us today. He observed before dying: "We are all beggars."

Now the gathered mourners were there not simply to accompany Luther on this, his last earthly journey, but also – and perhaps even mostly -- to see how the Reformer would die. If he died in agony and regret, it would bode ill for the whole movement of reform. But if he died in peace and equanimity, the movement would have some divine sanction. Imagine the pressure....!

Luther exits his earthly home with this cryptic remark on his lips: "We are all beggars."

Now, it must not be forgotten: this came from a man who in his prime had written quite viciously against beggars -- and Luther knew how to load acid into that stylus. In 1510, Luther penned a preface to the ever-popular "Book of Vagabonds," the *Liber Vagatorum*, where he complained about being fooled by "vagabonds and blabbermouths." Later, Luther's reforms toppled the medieval economy of salvation, to which beggars were essential. Beggars afforded an important opportunity for doing a "good work" that might earn anyone who ministered to them a few points on their divine report card. As far as Luther was concerned, beggars played not so much on people's sympathy, but on their fear of hell and longing for redemption. He had little good to say about them.

But now, in his last breaths, to say: “We are all beggars.” Was this some kind of deathbed conversation?! What could he possibly mean?

It’s worth noting what Luther did *not* say: he did not leave people with the observation he’d often made: “we are all saints and sinners.” Nor did he say what he’d so often written in that clenched, crabbed hand: “We are all priests....” For Luther had also written long and hard about “the priesthood of all believers.” No, in his dying moments, he did not leave people with a blanket ordination, which would have been appropriate, he left us with what seems like a blanket curse: “we are all beggars.”

Ah! We’ll never know what Luther’s intent was – but I want to suggest that maybe being a beggar is the other side of being a priest, just as being a saint is the other side of being a sinner. In Luther’s profoundly dialectical mind, not only are we both saint and sinner, *simul justus et peccator*, but also both priest and beggar, *simul sacerdos et pauper*. Priest and beggar: two sides of a human reality. What does this mean?

In his *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy* (W.W. Norton, 1996), a thick analysis of the third world in this country, journalist Earl Shorris observes: “Martin Luther practically invented the idea of welfare” (205). Luther’s reforms may have toppled a medieval economy of salvation, but that was only for the “haves.” For the “have nots,” it meant they suddenly didn’t eat. The medieval church, precisely through its priests, had long played a crucial role in poor relief. Priests dispensed alms; at great tables outside cathedrals, priests gathered food and other goods for the poor; through countless masses, priests amassed funds and then disseminated them to those in need. Dismantling the Roman Church meant eliminating services on which the disadvantaged depended. What would take their place? More insistently, *who* would take their place?

Whether he’s anticipated it or not, Luther created a welfare crisis of enormous proportions. He came up with an interesting solution: he authorized a transfer of responsibility for poor relief from churches to local communities: the towns, the villages, the cities that increasingly comprised a public square. But the language he used to authorize that transfer was the language of “priesthood of all believers.”

“Priesthood of all believers:” we in the Lutheran tribe are too used to using this language to affirm individual vocation and to confirm a latent anti-clericalism, anti-hierarchicalism; we too easily ignore Luther’s original call to civic engagement. Behind the language of the universal “priesthood of all believers” is the call to care for the poor.

Writing to the German nobility in 1520 Luther extends to the princes the title “priests,” and it is precisely in that context that he charges them with the task of caring for the poor. “No one,” Luther writes, “ought to go begging among Christians.... Every town and village should know and be acquainted with its poor.” This is what the priest would have known; this is what the priest would have done.

Not only princes are priests. When citizens of the town of Leisnig wrote to Luther for counsel on how they might care for the poor in their midst, Luther reminds them of the common calling as “priests.” With that call comes a civic responsibility: care for the poor. Because they are priests, all citizens should contribute to a common chest, which is then managed by an overseer whose duty it is “to know all the poor and inform the city council ... of what they need.” This is what a priest would have known; this is what a priest would have done.

I recall a conversation with a Syrian Orthodox Catholic businessman whom I met several years ago. With emphatic certainty, he spoke of his own village priest. That man knew the poor; that man knew what the needed. “That’s just what a priest does,” he shrugged, as if stating the obvious.

If we’re all priests, that’s just what we all do as well. Care for the poor is part of our civic responsibility. That’s one side of the equation: priests.

But what about the other: we also all beggars. What could Luther possibly have meant? He didn’t get much chance to elaborate this side of the equation....

Maybe, in dying, he realized how quickly fortunes turn. “Haves” could morph overnight into “have nots.” After all, Luther had never referred to the poor as “out there;” they were always “among us.” Indeed, they could at any moment “be us.” Was he worried about Katie, his wife, and their children? Would they all be suddenly beggars, themselves dependent on the mercy of other priests exercising their calling?

Maybe, in dying, he suddenly realized the limits of his own provisional attempts to create a working welfare system – and the dangers of paternalism and patronization lurking behind “serving the neighbor?” Service alone would not never ask the systemic question of justice: why are these particular neighbors so consistently having this particular need?

Maybe, in dying, Luther saw that he could never beg with that right hand, clenched forever around an invisible stylus. And in that, he was like so many other “haves” whose hands clutched forever what they held dear. They were possessed by their possessions, unable to reach out to anyone for anything.

Or did Luther, in dying, understand with sudden insight how far his own solution was from the example of Jesus, who was himself more beggar than priest. Again and again, he’s called a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” and according to the *Miss Manners of the Ancient World*, you were friends with the people you ate and drank with – and the people you ate and drank with were your friends. “Sinner” in that society meant “poor,” those who could not pay their taxes to the religious authorities. With this simple gesture of table fellowship, Jesus moved welfare from giving food to the poor to eating and drinking with them. Jesus *became* one of them.

I like to think the latter was the case, and that, in dying, Luther rather realized the power of the beggar, whose hand is not clenched around anything, but open, always open -- and free to reach out for the hand of the neighbor.

Priest and beggar, beggar and priest: this is Luther’s last insight into civic engagement.

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