

Bearing Our Crosses in the Home

2014 Emmaus Conference
Parkland Evangelical Lutheran Church
Tacoma, Washington
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Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!

אֲכֹן אֶתְּהָ אֵל מְסִתֵּתָר אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מוֹשִׁיעַ:

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." ²³ But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." ²⁴ But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" ²⁶ But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." ²⁷ And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-18, NKJV)

Here we have Jesus, a pleading mother, a possessed daughter, and the disciples. We also have an example of the cross in the life of a believer (the mother). The mother goes to the right Person and calls out to Him with the confession of who He is: "Lord, Son of David." She requests mercy for her demon-possessed daughter. The response she receives is what gets or attention.

In response to this mother's petition, the disciples bring their own petition to Jesus: "send her away." This prayer does not sound so kind, more than a bit uncharitable. But Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for their unkind request. Rather, He appears to join them in their disparagement of the woman. She is not a Jew, so why should Jesus help when He was sent to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel"?

The woman, intent on what her daughter needs, does not allow either the disciples or Jesus to dissuade her. Her request remains: "Lord, help me!"

Certainly now the merciful Savior of the world, the One who came to seek and save the lost, surely He will respond to this woman with the help she so desperately requests. But Jesus goes farther with His apparent dismissal of the woman. His words compare her to a little dog at the dinner table—not a very encouraging word from the Lord. The woman, however, is still not done. She will not disagree with Jesus characterization of her, instead, she accepts her status as no more than a little dog, but reminding her Lord that even the

dogs get a few crumbs, and that is all she asks for, a few crumbs. The perseverance of this woman in the face of apparent rejection is finally met with those grand words of our Lord: “O woman, great *is* your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”

In one of Martin Luther’s sermons on this text (the Gospel for Lent 2, *Reminiscere*) he prefaces it with a summary of just what is at stake in this episode of Jesus, a pleading mother, a possessed daughter, and the disciples:

We must, therefore, first of all realize that this Gospel is not treating of a trifling, insignificant matter, but of a very important teaching concerning faith’s life and death struggle before God. From it we are to learn that nothing, not even the throes of death, must deter us from calling upon God in prayer—even though he has already said “No” (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, volume 1, Eugene Klug, editor, 321).

The experience of being rejected by Jesus is at the heart of the trials, the cross, in the home. It the cause of great anguish, doubt, of faith being put under great pressure, asking the Lord: why?

The bearing of the cross is a uniquely Christian experience. It is not that people in general do not have burdens, they do. But the bearing of the cross is a matter of faith, a matter of the tension between the promises of God believed and the life situations experienced. Perhaps nowhere is this tension experienced more personally than in the home.

The home is where one lives in family. This family can be a single person or a married couple, it may include children or not. The actual location of a home is not important. Home is where one most generally interacts with other members of family: husband, wife, parents, children, extended family. Home is where we live in the God-given vocations of Christian, husband and wife, father and mother, children. Home itself, our lives in our various callings, is dislocated by sin: broken by divorce, by death, by other influences of a fallen world.

Where home is for the Christian, there will be conflict. Conflict arrives in the home via the carrier of conflict: the human. This means that conflict is present in the home regardless of the number of people. One person brings conflict, as do eight. The type and quantity of conflict may vary with the number of people in a home; the fact of conflict does not. Conflict arrives because of sin. Sin is present due to the inherited sin each human carries with him, as well as his own living out of that sin in his thoughts, words, and actions. Sin is rebellion against God, a First Commandment issue, but it quickly includes all other commandments.

“You shall have no other gods.” That is, you shall regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What is to have a god? What is God? Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in

every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. *That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God* (LC, First Commandment, Tappert, 365, *emphasis added*).

The failure to love God, which usually involves some form of the enthronement of self as god, affects the other people in our lives. With one's self as god, it is not surprising, but indeed expected, to create conflict with others, each of whom also considers himself to be god. So many 'gods' do not play well together.

To be a Christian does not negate conflict in the home, no matter if the home is one person or many. In fact, the awareness and understanding of such sin and resulting conflict is actually heightened due to the Christian's deeper understanding of the law. To be a Christian does affect the way such sin-induced conflict is viewed, identified, borne, resolved.

The conflict in the Christian home is a cross (although, there is a distinction between sin as conflict and cross as conflict which is addressed below). Martin Luther, in his "On the Councils and the Church," includes the possession of the holy cross as an external indication of the Christian Church.

the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5 [:11], "Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account." They must be pious, quiet, obedient, and prepared to serve the government and everybody with life and goods, doing no one any harm. No people on earth have to endure such bitter hate; they must be accounted worse than Jews, heathen, and Turks. In summary, they must be called heretics, knaves, and devils, the most pernicious people on earth, to the point where those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish, and plague them to death are rendering God a service. No one has compassion on them; they are given myrrh and gall to drink when they thirst. And all of this is done not because they are adulterers, murderers, thieves, or rogues, but because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God. Wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there, as Christ says in Matthew 5 [:11-12], "Blessed are you when men revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies his people, but also blesses them. (LW 41, 164)

But what does this mean? Is a home filled with conflict a sign that there, indeed, is a Christian home since, after all, look at all the bitterness, hard feelings, even hatred, exhibited in that home? If that were the case there would be no lack of Christian homes around the world. There is more than just sin-induced conflict that defines “cross.” Cross is the result of confessing Christ, believing His Word, holding it sacred, gladly hearing and learning it. Where such dedication to the Word of God is found in a home, there one can be sure there will be conflict. But the question is: with whom does this conflict occur?

Satan and the world, as well as our own sinful flesh, hate the Word of God, the promises of forgiveness of sins and mercy from a loving God. That hatred will show itself in various ways.¹ And that hatred is in some ways the cross of the Christian, but by no means all. There is a deeper truth here that makes the cross even more unbearable. The cross comes because of God. It is God with whom the believer is in conflict.

The silence of God, His hiddenness, His seeming lack of concern for those who call upon Him in distress—here is where the cross is truly found, where the burden, the yoke, is not light but bone-crushingly heavy. Or so it seems to weak flesh. The cross brings trials due to the friction between sinners, and through the seemingly random afflictions (illness, accident) that bring physical, emotional, and spiritual pain.

Abel, the faithful son, is murdered by the jealous son, Cain. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth, these faithful women remain barren for years, while seeing the apparent approval of God for other women: Hagar, Leah, Peninah (“and her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her” 1 Sam. 1:6). Joseph, blessed with dreams, is hated by brothers (“*here comes this dreamer...let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits...and we will see what becomes of his dreams*” (Genesis 37:18-20)). Jacob, blessed with sons, is “killed” by them when they deceive him about the death of his favored son, Joseph. Samuel the faithful judge has sons (Joel and Abijah – “*they took bribes and perverted justice*” 1 Sam. 8:3) that rival the iniquitous sons of Eli (Hophni and Phineas, “worthless men” 1 Sam. 2:12). David is overcome by his desire for another man’s wife (Bathsheba, the wife of

¹ “Some argue that the vision of life as a battle between good and evil is so misleading and so often misapplied that it is best to avoid all talk about it. The rhetoric of spiritual warfare, they say, should be banned from the church. Yet if we were to go down that road, we would have to bowdlerize much of the New Testament that so often explains the work of Christ and the life of the Christian in these terms. And rightly so! God’s Word does not back our delusions of self-righteousness or personal supremacy. Instead, it subverts our ambition to be winners by its message of victory through the cross of Christ. It uses the imagery of spiritual warfare to alter the way we see ourselves so that we consider ourselves as soldiers of the cross rather than spiritual superheroes. It changes and deepens our understanding of the battle between Christ and Satan. In that battle the victory comes through suffering and self-sacrificial love rather than domination and self-assertive power.” (Kleinig, *Grace*, 222)

Uriah—murdered at David’s command), and his own sons plot against his kingship (Absalom (who kills his half-brother Amnon after discovering Amnon’s rape of Absalom’s sister Tamar (Amnon’s half-sister) and Adonijah). These are some of the families which God reveals to us in Holy Scripture. These are the families of the patriarchs, of great men and women dedicated to God. But to see their homes is to see a sordid mess, full of conflict, conflict of a most desperate, devious, and satanically delicious sort. What are we to make of this?

The hiddenness of God lies at the center of the understanding of these lives shown to us by God’s revelation, and the lives we ourselves experience today. God is never away from home; but we may think or presume that He is on vacation more than we care to acknowledge. This apparent lack or delay of God’s gracious and speedy intervention (as measured by our own human timeline) is the cross which the Christian home and its inhabitants carry. This cross is further weighted by the knowledge that it occurs in the very vocations blessed and established by God: home and family, husband and wife, parents and children.

Consider the example of the above-mentioned Jacob and Joseph. In the lives of Jacob and Joseph we see the cross depicted in the reality of the suffering that is brought to the lives of father and son. These are men to whom have been given the great and wonderful promises of God, promises that include the blessings of becoming a great nation, possessing a rich land, and being the chosen family through which God will bring about the salvation of the world (Genesis 28:13-14). But the cross is found in the fact that these very promises of God add a depth and weight to the afflictions of Jacob and Joseph as the contrast between promise and reality is seismically shaken, resulting in suffering and shame.

Joseph is the first born son of Jacob’s beloved wife, Rachel. Joseph stands out from his brothers for that reason. We should perhaps not be too quick to judge Jacob’s favoritism for Joseph, highlighted by the gift of the “coat of many colors.” Still, the obvious preference of Jacob for Rachel’s oldest son, Joseph, did nothing to promote tranquility in the home, just the opposite. The sons of Leah, the wife ill-considered by their father, would find only more reason to despise the “dreamer.” An unintended consequence of Jacob’s favoritism toward Joseph was this fact of additional cause (however much it was unintended) for the older brothers to hate their little brother to such an extent that they would take opportunity to murder him. Only the intervention of the oldest brother would prevent the murder, but it would not stop the enslavement of Joseph nor its deliberate cover-up. All the brothers except Benjamin are complicit in bringing to their father an unending sorrow as he mourned the death (as he was led to believe) of the eldest son of his wife Rachel.

I would never have believed that such an outrageous sin could befall a man that he could knowingly and purposely see his father, consumed by old age and in addition also harassed by his sin, die and descend into hell without any pity and without all feeling of humanity and *στοργή*s (“of affection”) such as has been implanted by God

in all living creatures towards a father and a grandfather. Is this honoring father and mother? (LW 6, 403).

Luther, in his great commentary on Genesis, describes well the suffering of the cross by Jacob and Joseph.²

Jacob and Joseph are submitted to a very hard trial in a manner plainly different from and contrary to the promise. Nothing at all can be seen of God's care and concern. He does not send an angel and, to be sure, not even the leaf of a tree by which the devil is checked, but He even opens the window for him that he may rage against the father and the son. (LW 6, 360)

God is described here as active in the life of Jacob, active in bringing about that which appears contrary to His promises, "He even opens the window for [the devil]." Luther further expounds on the plans of the brother against Joseph and, perhaps unwittingly, also their own father. Into these troubles, the cross, the holy patriarchs Jacob and his son Joseph are now hurled.

This cross was fabricated for them by the artifices and stratagems of the brothers. They are very poor carpenters who fabricate and forge this hard cross for their father and their brother Joseph. The only ones who can endure such a cross are excellent and saintly parents. God keeps quiet and makes out that He does not see, as though He were helping these carpenters, and yet He sees that they are setting these doings into motion. But why does He allow this? Why does He not hurl His thunderbolts at them and prove Himself the undoing of these wicked attempts with their authors? Or why does He not rather allow robbers, adulterers, and tyrants to be tormented and afflicted and spare, such saintly men?

My reply is that God wants us to consider and learn how great the love of parents towards children is, that we estimate from this the magnitude of God's love by which He embraced us when He was willing to let His only-begotten Son suffer and be crucified for us. For Joseph is the image of God's Son. (LW 6, 384-5).³

Home and family are the greatest temporal blessings bestowed by God to human beings in this world. It is through these that new life is brought to the world. By these God

² In fact, the Genesis commentary is a rich mine through which runs a golden vein of pastoral insight into the lives of saints afflicted with the cross.

³ Luther describes in more detail this idea of Joseph as God's Son (which adds further to the discussion of the "cross" since all crosses of the Christian, the believer, are finally tied to the paradox of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ) "But of what kind is this mission? What is this idiom, to send a savior into Egypt to save Jacob and his whole house? How is he sent? He is thrown into a pit; he is sold; his father is killed. Is this sending a savior? It is, indeed, but in accordance with God's idiom. For he is appointed king, but God alone sees it. Jacob and Joseph do not see it inasmuch as they are involved in the greatest trouble and grief. This, then, is a special and heavenly language, to send a savior and to appoint a king by hurling him into a pit and hell. We should therefore accustom our hearts to this language so that we may learn to understand what David says elsewhere"... (LW 6:397).

provides the environment for the nurture of the young and the care of the elderly. Home and family are where husband and wife, parents and children, interact for each other's mutual benefit. God brings blessings to humans through these vocations which were instituted even before the fall into sin. The creation of the male and female human included God's blessing and the command: "be fruitful and multiply."

So God created man in His *own* [emph. mine] image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.²⁸ Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:27-28 NKJV)

The creation of the woman from the man included the institution of the marriage of the man and the woman.

Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.²³ And Adam said: "This *is* now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man."²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:22-24 NKJV)

In the Exhortation used in the Order for Christian Marriage we read of the divinely intended purpose of marriage:

Almighty God has created marriage for the preservation of the human family, and for the mutual help of those who enter into this holy union, to lighten the burdens of life, to alleviate its unavoidable cares, and by careful nurture to provide for the happiness of children.

[HUSBAND], it is your duty to love and honor your wife, and by daily consideration for her welfare always to seek to deepen her love for you.

[WIFE], it is your duty to love your husband, share with him faithfully all the cares of the household, and at all times to conduct yourself as his helpmeet and friend.

You should both remember that you have freely entered into a marriage in which your mutual happiness depends upon your faithfulness to your marriage vows. You should strive to make yourselves worthy of mutual love and esteem, and always set a good example of godly living for each other, for your children, and for your neighbors.

Forgive one another as you have been forgiven by Christ. Remember that you have been joined together by God, that you are no longer two but one flesh. Remember that you are one with Christ in Holy Baptism and in the Sacrament of the Altar, and be faithful to your high calling as Christian husband and Christian wife. May God the Holy Spirit richly bless your union, and keep you steadfast in the Christian faith so that you may join the whole Church as the bride of Christ at the

marriage feast of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and our heavenly Bridegroom (<http://www.blc.edu/comm/gargy/gargy1/ELHAGENDA.Marriage.htm>).

It is of great value to read this exhortation or ones similar to it in the service for a Christian marriage. The words define and confess why we gather, why God is interested in such a gathering, and what the institution means for how husband and wife live together in their home. We are taught that marriage is not of human origin but divine. This truth from Holy Scripture is neither to be silenced in the Church nor adapted to accommodate current viewpoints of (im)morality.

Instruction in these primary institutions of human life as established by God are part of the ordinary catechesis of a Christian congregation. Martin Luther, in the Small Catechism, deliberately includes the Table of Duties which sets forth the Biblical teaching on various vocations of Christian life, including that of husband and wife:

HUSBANDS – Likewise you husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers not be hindered. 1 Peter 3, 7. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. Colossians 3, 19.

WIVES – Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord...as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are as long as you do good and are not afraid with any terror. Ephesians 5, 22; 1 Peter 3, 6.

We cannot take for granted this understanding of the institutions God has set up for our good here in this world. Even if the past decade or so had not given more than enough fresh evidence, the fact is that the fallen world has never been especially enamored with the institutions of God. Perhaps church historians of future generations who take up the unenviable task of sorting through the last half of the 20th century and the early decades of the 21st will discover that the teachers of the church presumed too much in regards to teaching of the 4th and 6th commandments, the 1st Article of the Apostles' Creed, and the Table of Duties.⁴

4 "I don't believe that our young people are at all responsible for this shift of attitude, this reversal of values, which calls "evil good and good evil," which puts "darkness for light and light for darkness" (Is 5:20). We can't blame them for that. They have not created this disorder but are in fact its chief victims who suffer most from its ravages. They are, I fear, much more sinned against than sinning. Furthermore, I don't reckon that there is more sexual immorality among the young than the adults. There may indeed be less, if I can judge merely from my own experience. But that question does not interest me here. I merely maintain that the adults in our society are largely responsible for the confession of the young, which stems from their own immorality and sexual idolatry.

"We Christian pastors, teachers, and parents may also be to some extent responsible for this situation. We have suffered a loss of nerve. We have failed to convince ourselves and our people that sexual chastity is in fact a moral and theological virtue. We have been scared of being regarded as unenlightened moralists. We have failed to foster and defend those social customs and institutions that built up a system of support for this virtue to flourish. We have not backed up those young people who have tried to practice chastity. Those who have felt impelled to be sexually chaste or celibate have received more help from

God's blessing of the union (one flesh) of man and woman, husband and wife, often results in baby boys and baby girls (although some still seem to be surprised by this outcome – "you're what?!"). This reality, while perhaps more than a bit obvious, still needs the attention of the Church. Children need homes, a father and a mother, in which to be nurtured. Again, this truth is addressed in the Table of Duties:

PARENTS – Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. Ephesians 6, 4.

CHILDREN – Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." Ephesians 6, 1-3

THE YOUNG – You younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time. 1 Peter 5, 5-6.

The Christian home is where law and gospel are applied in the everyday circumstances of life. Here is where sinners rub up against each in very intimate settings, where the joyful and the sorrowful times are shared, where health and sickness, cleanliness and filthiness (of all kinds) are dealt with personally (i.e. one doesn't simply write a check and send it to a charity). The home is where everyone gets his hands dirty in the reality of life together.

God established home and family, marriage, parents and children, as blessings for us human beings. They are good gifts from a loving Father. We believe and confess this truth:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; that He richly and daily provides me with food and clothing, home and family, property and goods, and all that I need to support this body and life; that He protects me from all danger, guards and keeps me from all evil; and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I am in duty bound to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true. (emphasis added)

So we have these great blessings from God. What does this mean? It means 1) that such gifts are received with thanksgiving; 2) that God will not forget that He has given them for our good; 3) that Satan, world, and sinful flesh hate them and desire their destruction; 4) that God will use them, even in ways we consider "negative," for the strengthening of

Buddhism and new age philosophy than from the church. The result of this is apparent. While young people find it easy to justify sexual intercourse apart from marriage, those who believe in the value of chastity are hard put to defend it; they find little social support for their beliefs and behavior" (Kleinig, *Chastity*, 136).

trust in Him and His promises. It is, of course, the fourth item of this list that is the direct concern of this essay.

When Joseph spoke with his brothers after the death of their father Jacob, he did so to try and help them understand what had happened over the past decades. He summarized the actions of his brothers this way: “you meant it for evil;” he then described God’s ways in these words: “God meant it for good.” We more readily understand the brothers’ evil actions than we do the ways God uses and allows such for good, for His own purposes. This is so because God’s ways are not ours, so that we are so often blind to the action God takes for our good. In this we are like the disciples whom Jesus instructed regarding His upcoming passion:

“all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. ³² ‘For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. ³³ ‘They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.’ ³⁴ But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken” (Luke 18:31-34 NKJV).

Here the evangelist Luke gives us the Christological big picture for St. Paul’s summary: “*but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness*” (1 Corinthians 1:23 NKJ). This is the cross. And as the word “cross” serves as shorthand for the work of Jesus Christ accomplishing our salvation, so too does it serve as shorthand for the life of Christian, even, or most especially, in the home.

How is the cross manifested in the Christian home? Well, there are many manifestations, some of which may have aspects peculiar to our own time, but generally they may be found across boundaries of culture and time. The low view of marriage as a life-long union of man and woman is nothing new; neither is the conflict between parents and children. The fact that children often die due to illness or accident or deliberate violence prior to their parents’ death (something which has become uncommon among us) is also not a new thing under the sun. The first death of a human was of a young son (a child dying before his parents).

To speak about the bearing of the cross in the home is to speak about the fact that, first of all, no matter the home, there will always be conflict. The way by which conflict between sinners affects a particular home, or any single individual in a home, may and does vary. But the fact of the conflict between sinners does not.

What is this cross? I suppose in one way we can say that even though I just stated that all homes will have conflict, there is a very real sense in which only the Christian home has conflict understood as the cross. So how is cross defined? Is cross simply conflict or affliction? It can be, and it is often thought about in that general, non-Christian specific way. Sin and its consequences are universal in the homes of sinners. Have we, though arrived at the uniqueness of the cross in the Christian home when we discuss this general affliction

and observe conflict between family members? I suggest that we have not. For the cross is more than such friction or affliction. The cross is affliction which is allowed by God, when God is seen as either the One who should help and does not, or as the One who actually is the active One who places the burden upon us. It is in this sense that we begin to understand the great difference between sin-induced conflict or affliction in general, and that which is intimately tied to faith, trust, in the Triune God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

The cross in the home is borne by all the individuals but in different ways. Husband and wife bear the cross of their own sinfulness while learning to live with another sinner in God's blessed institution of marriage. Father and mother bear the cross of their own sin, the unreliability, indecisiveness, inconsistency of each other, as well as the cross of the sins of their children and the illnesses of their children. Children bear the cross of their own sin, the sins of the parents against them, the sins of their siblings against them. Beyond the immediate family, the sins and illnesses and tragedies of other extended family members will be borne by them all. The death (by disease or accident) of an aunt, cousin, or grandparent, the divorces of grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, each of these brings the cross into the lives of the members of the extended family.

Beyond the burden of the cross in these forms, there is the cross of those who desire to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ and witness the falling away of other family members: through apathy, deliberate action, ignorance, or other of the myriad of reasons given for rejecting the grace of God. The burden of the cross at such times may be even more acute than that which occurs through illness and death. Such a burden is very real as one contemplates the judgment of eternal death on all who do not know Jesus Christ and Him crucified, the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Here let us remember our Lord's own weeping over the apostasy of Jerusalem:

Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it,⁴² saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things *that make* for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. (Luke 19:41-42).

Or King David at the death of his son Absalom:

"Then the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went, he said thus: 'O my son Absalom—my son, my son Absalom—if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!'" (2 Samuel 18:33 NKJ)

I want to use as an example of the cross in the home an episode from *The Hammer of God*. It is found in the third chapter of the third part of the book. It is part of the section that was not initially translated and published in the earlier printing of the book. I do not know why this part was not included in that earlier edition, but I do know that for myself this section serves as one of the very high points of the entire novel. We are listening to a conversation between a grandmother (Agneta) and her pastor (Pastor Torvik). The topic is the grandson (Gunnar Schenstedt), who has also been the close friend of the pastor. The

grandson has sinned grievously, not only against himself, but against a young woman; the consequences of his sin are beginning to fall out, bringing ruin and even death.

[Aunt Agneta to Pastor Torvik:] “But there is a curse connected with sin. It corrodes as poured acid. A long time afterwards one finds holes where one least would have expected.

“You know...I wish I could take upon myself all the consequences of what Gunnar has broken. It is so cruel to see those who have no fault in it. Now I have just my small part that I must carry. And I am happy to do so.

“You see, atonement comes only through suffering. Through suffering our Savior opened the gates of Heaven, through suffering his apostles carried the Gospel out in the world—rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer. It is a great favor to bear testimony to Christ by suffering his fellowship. I believe Scripture calls it bearing in the body the marks of the Lord Jesus. *Usually we suffer only for our own sins. But sometimes we are given the favor of suffering for the sins of others.* That is part of the mystery of the Atonement: when one is joined to Christ, one is given the task of lifting a portion from a certain sinner and suffering in his stead, so that he does not have to carry alone all the bitterness of his deeds.

“There is something wondrous about this power that God has laid in innocent suffering” (*Hammer of God*, 312, *emphasis added*).

The “suffering for the sins of others” is part of the cross which comes to us unexpectedly. It is a cross which burdens not with consequences of our own, but those of others. We are left wondering, “why?” “Why now?” Grandmother Agneta has had opportunity to meditate on this basic question. Her conclusion is that she is given the gift (!) of helping her grandson with the effects of his sin in his life so that he is not left alone with the weight of his misdeeds.⁵ This is a profound insight into the cross, one which I believe we cannot arrive at through mere human reason or strength, rather, it is spiritually discerned.⁶ We hear the

⁵ Giertz would comment on this same concept in his sermon notes for John 2:1-11, the Gospel for Epiphany 2: “Our homes are the most intimate natural fellowship in this world. It is there that we see the clearest indications of our congenital selfishness. In our day-by-day tensions with people who try our patience it is not possible to withdraw, and since we cannot hide our real nature, the testing of our character can be very trying. But it is not intended that we should solve problems of home and family by ourselves. It is as members of the body of Christ, all united in the same common faith in him, that we find strength to serve one another. It is not a question, then, who is the dominant one, or who has the greatest success, or who makes the most money, but it is a matter of shared joys and burdens which we bear together” (Giertz, *Preaching from the Whole Bible*, Second Sunday after Epiphany, 25).

⁶ Luther observes regarding the hiddenness of the things of faith to human reason: “The second reason is that faith has to do with things not seen [Heb. 11:1]. Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says: “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (I

grandmother's conclusion; we do not hear the anguish of spirit through which she went to get there. "One of the chief ways we suffer is by loving people who are incredibly limited by the fact that they're human beings, and they're going to disappoint us and break our hearts....We are all heartbroken" (Mary Karr, quoted in *Glorious Ruin*, 76).

Moving from the cross to the bearing of the cross brings us to the consideration of lament. Lament is the anguish of spirit that results in asking God: why? Lament comes from the heart that is constricted by pain, whether one's own or that of a loved one in the family. In the book of Psalms we find the words to express such lamentation to God. Psalms of lament are not strangers or occasional to the Psalter. Lamentation is found scattered throughout the Psalms. It is part of what it means to live as a Christian in this world.⁷ We cry out to God for help because we believe His promises but we do not feel or experience them to be true. Instead we feel pain, hurt, sorrow, loss. Why? Why a divorce? Why cancer? Why a miscarriage? Why that accident? These are not new questions for God. He has heard them before, and He has even written down some ways for us to talk to Him about it.

In his masterful book on Christian spirituality, Dr. John Kleinig devotes a chapter to the spiritual discipline of meditation. There he includes a section on lament in which he lists a variety of psalms that teach us and provide us with the vocabulary of lament to God. Some of these psalms are: 69, 17, 10, 38, 25, 51, 55, 88, 41, 6. There are many more. He describes lament in this way:

The psalms of lament and complaint confront us with those experiences that seem to contradict what we believe. They take God at His Word and hold Him to His promises. They look for God's light in the face of darkness, for His grace in the face of His wrath, His justice in the face of injustice, and His help in the face of trouble. It is, after all, easy to discern the hand of God and to believe in His goodness when things go well. But it is hard, very hard indeed, to recognize His goodness and to trust in His provision for us when the bottom falls out of our lives. It's hard to see His goodness when we are surrounded by darkness. That's when we need the eyes

Sam. 2[:6]). This is not the place to speak at length on this subject, but those who have read my books have had it quite plainly set forth for them.

"Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith.⁶⁹ As it is, since that cannot be comprehended, there is room for the exercise of faith when such things are preached and published, just as when God kills, the faith of life is exercised in death" (Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, LW 33, 62-62).

⁷ "The psalms of lament and complaint confront us with those experiences that seem to contradict what we believe." (Kleinig, *Grace*, 137)

of faith most of all, eyes that see Him at work with us, bringing good out of evil and life through death (*Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today*, John Kleinig, 136).

I have provided below, as one example of a psalm of lament, Psalm 88.

O LORD, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You.

² Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry.

³ For my soul is full of troubles, And my life draws near to the grave.

⁴ I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man *who has* no strength,

⁵ Adrift among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And who are cut off from Your hand.

⁶ You have laid me in the lowest pit, In darkness, in the depths.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me, And You have afflicted *me* with all Your waves.

⁸ You have put away my acquaintances far from me;

You have made me an abomination to them; *I am* shut up, and I cannot get out;

⁹ My eye wastes away because of affliction. LORD, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You. ¹⁰ Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise *and* praise You?

¹¹ Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave? *Or* Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?

¹² Shall Your wonders be known in the dark? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

¹³ But to You I have cried out, O LORD, And in the morning my prayer comes before You.

¹⁴ LORD, why do You cast off my soul? *Why* do You hide Your face from me?

¹⁵ I *have been* afflicted and ready to die from *my* youth; I suffer Your terrors; I am distraught.

¹⁶ Your fierce wrath has gone over me; Your terrors have cut me off.

¹⁷ They came around me all day long like water; They engulfed me altogether.

¹⁸ Loved one and friend You have put far from me, *And* my acquaintances into darkness.

One of my favorite commentaries on the book of Psalms describes Psalm 88 this way:

“With *darkness* as its final word, what is the role of this psalm in Scripture? For the beginning of an answer we may note, first, its witness to the possibility of unrelieved suffering as a believer’s earthly lot. The happy ending of most psalms of this kind is seen to be a bonus, not a due; its withholding is not a proof of either God’s displeasure or His defeat. Secondly, the psalm adds its voice to the ‘groaning in travail’ which forbids us to accept the present order as final. It is a sharp reminder that ‘we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies’ (Rom. 8:22f). Thirdly, this author like Job, does not give up. He completes his prayer, still in

the dark and totally unrewarded. The taunt, 'Does Job fear God for naught?', is answered yet again." (*Psalms 73-150*, Derek Kidner, 319).

Here we are given the beginning to our answer of the question: how do we bear the crosses in the home? God has brought the cross, so it is to God that we speak in prayer, often using the very words He has inspired for us to pray and to sing to Him. For we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit groans and speaks on our behalf.

In addition to prayer and our casting our burdens on the Lord, we are directed to the Gospel, the promises of God for us, for our rescue from sin and death. Luther points to how Joseph and Jacob would return again and again to the promises God has given the family of Abraham, that there they find their comfort and assurance. Luther goes on to address the Christian:

To us it is also said in Baptism, in Absolution, in Communion: "I am the Lord your God, do not be troubled! I will care for you! Cast your care on Me! You have a God who has promised that He will care for you." "And yet I see the contrary," do you say? "You do, indeed, see the contrary, but it is a trial which is useful for this purpose, that you may learn and experience how kind the Lord is. For if this trial were not added, you would remain in the flesh, stupid and senseless, and would never understand what I mean when I say: 'I am the Lord your God.' So it is necessary for you to be instructed and by the actual experience of various trials to learn that I am the Lord your God." Thus it is written in Deut. 8:4: "He fed you with manna that you might know that it is not only by bread, etc."

This is not done that you may perish, because Baptism is certain, and the promise and absolution are reliable. What for, then? This is done that you may learn what powerful life there is in the Word and that you may come to this conclusion for yourself: "However harshly I am disciplined and afflicted and come to nothing, it is nevertheless done with this end in view, that I might remember my Baptism and God's promise; for I have God, who is taking care of me, and about this I am in no doubt at all, even though all things seem to be against me. They are only temptations and testings of my faith, to see whether I believe that God is my Protector."

These are the examples of the fathers in which I have stated that the promise and their faith in the promise should be observed, and afterwards also their cross. For these are the chief points in the stories of the saints. (*LW 6, 364, emphasis added*).

The strength to bear the cross in the home is found not in ourselves, but in the gift of the Gospel, receiving this gift from our Savior in the various ways by which He provides it.

When parents are concerned about the spiritual welfare of their children, especially in the later teen years and early twenties, but really throughout life, fathers and mothers are directed to the promise of God poured on sons and daughters in the gracious water of life of Holy Baptism. The child for which the parents are concerned is a baptized child of the

Most High God. He loves our children more than we do, even though in times of affliction and trial and struggle and illness we may question that truth. The promise connected with the water is on what we rely, “God’s own child” is not forgotten by Him. Even though a mother may forget her child, the Lord does not forget His own.

Teaching children to make the sign of the cross as an ordinary part of the life of prayer, as Luther teaches us in our Lutheran confessions, is tied directly to the making of the sign of the cross both on the forehead and over the heart as part of the baptism rite. It is a physical reminder of the gift freely given.

And though our mortal eye is dim
And sees but simple water;
Faith sees Christ Jesus, and in Him
The Lamb ordained for slaughter.
We see the cleansing fountain, red
With the ear blood of Jesus,
Which, from all sins inherited
And our misdeeds, can free us;
Eternal life bestowing. (“To Jordan Came Our Lord,” ELH 247:7)

We subordinate experience to the objectively given and subjectively applied promise of God in the sacrament He established for our comfort amid doubt (“I [your child/spouse] am baptized into Christ” (ELH 246).

Bearing the cross in the home is a fruit of the gift of the Gospel. The husband and wife, the fathers, mothers, and children (not infant communion) that kneel together to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ are individually and collectively strengthened by the remission of each one’s sins. My knowledge of my own need for and received gift of forgiveness is fundamental to my life in my vocation in family. The Gospel received and trusted in these ordinary ways provide the foundation on which to rely in times of trial, when accidents occur, when death strikes, when homes break. There is forgiveness, and that means life, that means salvation.

One teaching I try especially to emphasize with catechumens is the grace of God which awaits them even when, especially when, they think they have sinned more than God (or pastor or family or congregation) can forgive. The picture I pray that they remember, and that I remember when I greet them, is that of the prodigal son’s father in the chapter of lost things found (Luke 15). He is watching for his missing son. When the father sees the son (“when he came to himself”) he runs to meet him, to hug him, to forgive and give a feast of thanksgiving.

This is the absolution, that efficacious word to be spoken to the penitent sinner. The third sacrament of the Lutheran church, absolution, deserves more of our attention in this sin-stricken world. The individual burdened with remorse is to hear, as often as needed, the word from God: you are forgiven. “It is taught among us that confession should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse” (Tappert, AC XI). A re-invigorated practice of private absolution is a powerful gift for the Christian family beset with the cross, with

affliction, with sin, with doubt.⁸ It may initially provide more conflict between experience and promise. However, we are not expected to withhold the Gospel due to possible consequences—that sort of thinking tends to view the Gospel less as gift and more as reward, which undermines the very nature of the Gospel.

Bearing the cross in the home begins with understanding that the cross (affliction, tension between experience and divine promise) is not unusual in the Christian life. It is, in fact, ordinary. So Luther instructs (on Genesis 37:20 “Come, therefore, let us kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, “Some wild beast has devour him.” We shall see what will become of his dreams!”):

“This is therefore the wisdom of the Christians, to endure the plans of God and to persevere by faith in the promise that has been given, for it is indeed sure and firm, and the Lord’s covenant is faithful, according to the statement of Ps. 121:4: “Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” But human reason replies: “These things are indeed excellently and beautifully spoken, but I am experiencing the contrary. He is not only sleeping but even snoring; to be sure, there is plainly no God at all to care for us and have regard for us.” Thus Jacob is free from care and sure of the promise of God and also of the immovable agreement and covenant, yet he is treated by God in such a way that neither he nor his son seems to have guardian angels to resist the fury of a brother. All are silent and allow the devil to rage against the holy church. Where is God now?” (LW 6:360)

...“We are often reminded and taught by examples of this kind that the promise must be apprehended by faith and that one must not doubt God when He makes promises. For as God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), so it is impossible for Him not to exercise care for us, especially if we adhere to the promise. For if this is firmly apprehended, it is impossible for us to be forsaken, because God is true. Accordingly, when He allows us to be tried, to be led down to hell, to be mortified, as we learn in this example of Jacob, we must always turn back to the promise, and that horrible scandal by which we are being crucified must be removed from our eyes.” (LW 6:360)⁹

⁸ Tullian Tchividjian is not speaking about private absolution when he writes: “Contrary to the popular belief, Christianity is not about good people getting better. If anything, it is about bad people coping with their failure to be good” (*Glorious Ruin*, 78); however, the fact is “bad people coping with their failure to be good” is precisely what private absolution addresses in a direct, personal, God-to-me intimacy. The absolution removes the desire but inability to cope from us and puts it in God’s hands. I cannot forgive myself. God speaks His word to our ears so that we receive what He can and does do, what He promises and gives: mercy, grace, forgiveness.

⁹ More of this Luther on this topic from his Genesis commentary. “But Jacob received not only heavenly and eternal rewards but also temporal wages exceeding all hopes and powers of thought. For through this momentary and slight temptation (cf. 2 Cor. 4:17) he was made the father of the king of Egypt, and he was also a bishop and teacher of many peoples. This is also a bodily and outstanding reward for patience and

Promise, by faith, overcomes the scandal of our crucifixion.

Christian families in crisis, spouses in conflict, homes breaking, children bringing dishonor—these are crosses for the Christian home and our various vocations. We learn to identify them as such, and to trust more and more in the promises of God. Such faith does not guarantee easy resolution, but actually increases the struggle as we set God’s promises against our experiences. But God’s word remains firm. “And take they our life / Goods, fame, child, and wife, / Let these all be gone, / They yet have nothing won; / The Kingdom ours remaineth” (ELH 250:4). This truth, finally, is lived, confessed, endured, in this world. The promise points us to the time when our eyes shall behold our Redeemer (Job 19). That alone is the confidence of the cross, the very place from which our Savior said to you and me, to all families that struggle with sin and death: “It is finished.” And it is.

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steadfastness in adversity. Accordingly, God is accustomed to hide His face and to withdraw His hand from His saints and loved ones, and He allows them to mourn, to be sold, to be thrown into prison, and to die, just as if they were the enemies of God, for whom He seems to care more than for them not because He really feels as He appears to be outwardly but because He is delighted in the works of His hands on account of this game, so to say. For He says: “Those whom I love, I reprove” (cf. Heb. 12:6). (LW 6, 356)

“Meanwhile, during this horrible cross of the father and the son, God is deaf and dumb, taking no thought of the things that are done and not knowing them. But faith is present, and God is still speaking to his heart, saying: “O Joseph, wait; be patient; believe! Do not despair! Cling to the promise which you heard from your father!” In this way God speaks to him through the word of his father. “God promised seed to your great-grandfather, your grandfather, and father. Persevere in that promise with firm faith!” But He speaks with him in a wonderful silence, in which he sees nothing and hears nothing. For God, so to say, is blind and dead; he only lives by and relies on the general promise: “God promised to Abraham, etc. I believe in God, in whom my fathers believed.” Later, He will really speak with him in a wonderful manner when He appoints him king and savior of Egypt. But now Joseph is buried and dead, and he has his Preparation and Sabbath; his father is also dying, but they will both rise again by the power of God, which makes the dead alive” (LW 6, 405-6).

APPENDIX

Luther and the "little black dog – Remorse"

Luther is here addressing the situation of youthful sins which afflict souls in later years through remembrance of a shameful act. Parents act to keep children away from such sins, not only for the good of their souls here and now, but also for future years, should God grant such time. The absolution of sin is real and true; nevertheless consequences of sin, whether physical or emotional or spiritual remain to burden the sinner. An abortion in one's teen years is not an act which can be safely swept under the rug of age or forgetfulness. It may haunt, and often does, the consciences of those involved. The "little black dog" will not let go, but will remain, pulling into the mind the images of that act like a dog brings footprints of mud through a home. It is not about unforgiveable sins, rather it is about the burden of earlier actions continuing to be used by Satan to condemn and to break the soul of the one weighed down with remorse. Parents do children no favors by allowing, condoning, or simply being deliberately ignorant of sins committed by those entrusted to their care. Parents are not in the role of non-judgmental cronies of their children's follies, but rather are to exercise judgment through instruction in righteousness, through discipline, through forgiveness.

"Similarly, we often give severe warnings concerning clandestine bethrothals that they should be avoided on both sides, by girls and youths.²⁸ But you can see many under the blind impulse of love rushing into ruin even contrary to conscience, the young men seizing wives by force, not marrying them, and the young women not becoming married contrary to the will of their parents. What else do these people do but pollute themselves with horrible and mortal sin? This, to be sure, sleeps for a time. The girl pleases him, and his heart burns with love for her so that he thinks and dreams of nothing else day and night. But after one or two months are past, there follows sighing and groaning, as Abigail says to David in 1 Sam. 25:29–31:29 "The life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God, etc. ... my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause, etc." Such scruples continually harass conscience, namely: "I married her against the wishes of her parents." Then follows the itching of the neck, the bad little black dog Remorse, who bites you all your life without ceasing, even though your sin is forgiven.

"But grief of conscience becomes even heavier among those who now know God's will that marriages should not be contracted without the consent of parents. For previously, when we did not know God's commandment, ignorance in a way had an excuse. But rather than trying to find pleasure in a secret and clandestine union, how much better would it be now to enter into marriage with the consent and will of parents so that in sleeping with the girl you may embrace her with joy and a good conscience without any scruple and sobbing, with God as well as the parents smiling on you and bestowing favor upon you? In the former case, the heart conscious of its abiding guilt would keep on murmuring: "I could have obtained and enjoyed her

with the goodwill and joy of her parents; why, then, have I grieved God and men?" That little black dog of repentance which is too late does not cease barking and biting, however much you know that your sins have been forgiven.

"Those of us who are in the church's ministry often have much trouble with such consciences that are troubled and burdened with this kind of sin until we encourage and console them. Therefore we are rightly angry with the jurists and their canons, inasmuch as they are the authors of these disturbances. They set fire to houses and then leave them to us to put out. But we do what we can; we absolve and console those who are burdened by such sins. But the little black dog continues to act up! Grief breaks out afresh as often as any misfortune strikes in the household, when a son takes sick, a wife has a miscarriage or dies, etc. The cause of the whole evil is manifest, namely, contempt of parents, and the little dog immediately barks at this. If this cause is absent, we endure difficulties of every kind with more equanimity, and the heart is quiet and tranquil and knows that this kind of life is pleasing to God. It plays with a wife free from care and is certain that all its doings are approved by God, nor is it easily moved or terrified even if something of an adverse nature happens." (LW 6, 369)

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