

## A Lutheran Look at Law and Gospel

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This morning I would like to take a few minutes to brag about our *Daily Devotional Guide* one more time. Now that you have had some time to look inside of it, I'm sure you can understand why I'm so proud of what we've produced with this book. This weekend we celebrate the connection between that classic biblical duo, *Mary and Martha*, as we get ready for the *Book of Faith Initiative*, set to begin here at Zion later this month. Our meditation for Saturday, March 14, features Juli's story as a testimony to *Mary's* interest in listening at the feet of Jesus. Juli's is a story that recounts the journey of how she reoriented her life around God's Word, as her meditation talks about how her life changed in the moment she asked for God's help. "Ron and I were going to Maine soon. I hadn't been in church in all the years I'd known Ron. Before we left for Maine, I lay down on the bed and prayed to God. 'Please, God, please take away this pain while I'm in Maine, and I promise I'll go to church.'" As it turned out, on their third day in Maine, Juli's pain was gone, and it never came back. "I'm thinking, I'm going to go to church. Thanks, God." And that's exactly what she and Ron did. I've got to admit that it's kind of risky leading with a story that prays for miracles. But the truth is that sometimes we're surprised by how God responds to our pleas for help. This time God got Juli's attention, and changed her life.

Juli's is a great story about how her love for God inspired a love for God's Word and Bible study. If you read yesterday's devotion yesterday, then you know what I mean. If not, then you'll enjoy it when you do. But I also want to move ahead to tomorrow, when we will admire a living testimony to the power and presence of the many *Martha's* who thrive among us. I am referring to the daily devotion by Helen Heller. Helen loves lists – *to do* lists, getting 'round to it lists, bucket lists.... So, when I asked her to come up with some lists of why she loves Zion and why she loves the church, she out did herself once again. I ran into a little problem with her prayer. I liked her prayer, especially the quote of Dag Hammarskjöld. Thirty-plus years ago, a professor of mine, who took me under his wings when I was a seminarian at Trinity Luther Seminary, Walt Bouman, now deceased, gave me a book by Dag Hammarskjöld as a sign of his appreciation for the work I had done for him both in and out of class. I have seen Hammarskjöld's name every now and then; but when I saw Helen reference it, I thought that I would take the opportunity as editor to embellish just a bit. Since Helen is Danish, I thought I would introduce Dag Hammarskjöld as her fellow Dane, and then refer to his life as United Nations Secretary-General, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, mystic and theologian.

As all of you know, I married a Norwegian thirty-two years ago, and before I came to Zion, I served as the Pastor of one of northeast Ohio's historic Swedish Lutheran congregations. So, I knew that *Olie* and *Swen* pretty much accounted for your basic

Norwegian and Swedish names. *Dag* seemed clearly Danish to me, and since Helen is Danish, I thought it would work perfectly. The only problem was that *Dag* was Swedish. I actually discovered this error prior to our *Daily Devotional Book* going to print, primarily because Helen came into the Church Office after she had proofed her page, and told me so. The truth is that I was sitting in front of the computer making the change when Helen came into the office. But somehow, a good many copies got out and in print with the mistake I thought I had fixed still in tact. So, just keep in mind that neither Helen nor I are under the misimpression that *Dag Hammarskjöld* was Danish.

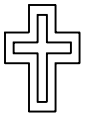
In any event, despite the fact that *Dag* is Swedish, perhaps because of it, the prayer that Helen crafted is great. Actually, in classic Helen-style, it's a list of prayers, each with its own encouragement. (1) May we continue to have goals we accomplish together. (2) May we count our blessings and give thanks in all things. And there's that *Dag Hammarskjöld* line, (3) 'for all that will be, YES!' The full quote is, "For all that has been, thanks! For all that will be, YES!" That is exactly what Walt Bouman taught, namely, learning to say YES to the gospel, learning to believe the YES that God speaks through the gospel, learning to say YES to the future God promises with the gospel of Jesus' love, the good news of God's kingdom, and the power of the Spirit's presence alive among us. Like Luther himself in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and generations of Lutherans since, beginning in the modern era with Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing on with Paul Tillich in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Walt Bouman did not begin his work of theology with Scriptural principles or traditional doctrines. Rather, he began with our experience of God, our experience of God's will, and God's presence, and God's power.

Our First and Second Lessons proclaim a classic Lutheran theme here on the Third Sunday of Lent: *Law and Gospel*. This is a crucial key for understanding Lutheranism. Discerning the difference between *Law and Gospel* is what made Lutherans Lutheran according to our founding documents, and according to centuries of educational institutions that taught us that this is what defined and distinguished Lutherans within the various families of faith that make up the denominational landscape. Lutherans do not begin with the theme of *Law and Gospel* because the Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments, with the Old Testament pronouncing God's law through Moses and the New Testament proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Lutherans begin with the theme of *Law and Gospel* as the key to interpreting the Scriptures because these are the ways we experience God – as giver of law, the one who makes the rules, who sets the bar, who determines what is right, evaluating our performance as judge, jury, and executioner, or, on the other hand, as our gracious redeemer, as our forgiving father, as a nurturing mother, whose faithfulness is sure and whose love is forever. *Law and Gospel*, threat or grace, a pervasive NO or an ultimate YES: these were Walt Bouman's teaching trademarks; and they are the themes that come through our First and Second Lessons today. In Exodus 20:1-17, God is the law-giver who persists in visiting the iniquity of parents upon their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, even great-great-grandchildren. Then in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul tells us about a God who is

thoroughly gracious: “Jews demand signs, Greeks desire wisdom; but we proclaim Christ Crucified, scandal to the Jew, folly to the Greek, but to those who are called” – to those who believe, who know first-hand the embrace of God’s grace – this Gospel is “the true wisdom of God’s ways and the saving power of God’s love”, fully present and forever ours through Christ our Lord. *Law and Gospel* is a great theme for finding our way through the Scriptures to the God who reveals Himself there. But more than that, it is a better way for understanding how God is working through our experiences in life to claim our hearts with His wondrous love, and our lives with the good news of His amazing grace. In other words, *Law and Gospel* is more to Lutherans than a key to interpreting the Bible. It is the key to interpreting life. It is the key to understanding God.

Lutherans have been creative throughout history in bringing this key to the table of theological discussion ever since Martin Luther applied his discovery that God is gracious to every layer of life and faith. In contrast, north of the border in Scandinavian countries, where all presiding Catholic bishops embraced the Evangelical message of the Lutheran Reformation, as compared to none – not one single Catholic bishop – doing so in Luther’s Germany, the discipline of theology took a different direction. The need for theological argument and counter-argument with opponents everywhere in Germany was not duplicated in Scandinavian Lutheranism. Theological traditions were more settled, more stable, more stoic in substance and in style, with a sense of order and structure the operative principle in matters of faith and life. Rhetorical flair, headline grabbing lead-ins to new ways of proclaiming the truth of the gospel were always more characteristic of the German end of the Reformation and the theological traditions it inspired and required.

However, when one looks at the depth of commitment and the willingness to witness with quiet courage at great sacrifice in serving God and neighbor, how can we not be impressed by the steadfast faith of persons like Wallenberg and Hammarskjöld, whose lives, without flair or fanfare, were given selflessly in pursuit of a better world for all God’s children everywhere on earth. Raoul Wallenberg, missing-in-action to this day, was the Swedish diplomat who, without regard to what might happen to him, used his diplomatic position in Hungary to save 20,000 Jews from deportation and death toward the end of World War II. Dag Hammarskjöld, the only person to have received a Nobel Peace Prize posthumously, lost his life in a plane crash flying into the jungles of the Congo on a peace mission while serving as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. This gets us back to the meditation of Helen Heller for tomorrow, filled with the brevity of “to-do” lists, and three short and crisply phrased prayers: may we have goals we accomplish together; may we count our blessings and give thanks; and then that line from Hammarskjöld, for all that will be, YES! It may not have the rhetorical flair of Luther, the systematic breadth of Schleiermacher, the philosophical profundity of Tillich, but here is a prayer flowing from a life that trusted in the gospel as the ultimate affirmation of God’s grace, producing the freedom of faithfulness and love in action, regardless of the cost, because the cost has been borne, once for all, by Christ on the Cross, the wisdom of God’s ways, the power of God’s love, which is ours ... in Jesus’ name. Amen



## Monday, March 16: A Meditation by Helen Heller

**Scripture, Luke 10.38-42:** *“As they went on their way, Jesus entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.’”*

For every Mary there is a Martha. Juli (from Saturday’s meditation) is a Mary, who loves to sit and listen as Jesus teaches, and that is good. I am a Martha, who enjoys going through lists of things that need to be done in order to make sure that we’re doing our part in serving our Lord by sharing God’s love with others. There’s the work of the Chancel Guild, our Women’s Bible Study, Zion’s Comfort Givers, Sunday Worship and Sunday School, work to be done at home, in the community, with family, near and far.

Why do I love the church? Let me count the ways. (1) It’s like family, and not just *like family*, it is family. I love the warm glow I have when I am able to sit in church with my children and grandchildren, and watch as Christian serves as acolyte, Savannah reads, and Summer wears her angel costume in the children’s Christmas play. (2) There are wonderful memories here, like Chuck climbing on the roof of the church to check the gutters for leaves, debris, and melting ice. (3) There are always women at work sewing quilts, putting together school kits and health kits, packing and transporting hundreds of pounds of goodies for *Lutheran World Relief*; and (4) I love discussing the Bible lessons from *Lutheran Women Today*. (5) I enjoy singing with the choir and laughing out loud with people who have so much fun rehearsing our anthems for Sunday worship. Laughing, caring, loving, sharing, serving: these are the reasons I love the church.

In addition to the things I enjoy regularly, I have a “bucket list” of things I’d like to see happen before Christ returns. (1) I’d like to see a quiet corner of church property filled with shrubs, flowers, and bushes where we can meditate when the weather is nice. (2) Cremations are increasing in frequency, with more churches adding a columbarium to the floor plan. That would be a good thing for Zion to do. (3) And wouldn’t it be great if we ever understood what happens with the Memorial Fund! What’s your bucket list?

**Prayer:** Dear Lord – May our congregation continue to have goals we accomplish with a sense of togetherness. May we count our blessings and give thanks in all things; and, “for all that will be, yes.” Amen (This final petition is a well-known prayer offered by Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961.)

