

Nbr. 26 – September, 2020

### The Dear Cross

Luther had a word for the cross in the lives of Christians. He called it the “dear” cross.

Amazing! Our flesh would like to avoid the cross, yet our Lord said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). And the more we become involved in Evangelism, it can seem, the more crosses we end up bearing.

Jesus went on to talk about gaining the whole world and forfeiting one’s own life . . . which is, in effect, what He did. Not on any “half-price” cross, though! Christ paid our ransom, paid it in full. He forfeited His life. He gained the world.

When the former Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev died, there was a major state funeral. The event was marked by military precision, marching soldiers, and Marxist rhetoric. Of course, no one made mention of God. Just before the coffin was closed, however, the widow Brezhnev took a last look at her husband, then wordlessly traced the sign of the cross over his chest.

No one knows what was in her heart, or what had been in her husband’s heart when he died. Yet it seems safe to say that the cross meant something to Mrs. Brezhnev. And it seems equally safe to say that it would not have meant so much if Jesus had settled for a mere half-price cross.

Thank God, He didn’t. “Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9). His is the saving name of the saving God, the name we have the privilege to proclaim. When we do, no doubt, we will encounter the cross.

See? **WOW!** Because of all that Christ has done for us, we can regard it as the *dear* cross.

### re:Vitality Update

*re:Vitality* is Lutheran Revitalization. We engage in it not simply to preserve an institution, though. We do it because we are the church.

The first step in *re:Vitality* is a congregational self-assessment survey, formerly abbreviated “SA.” This instrument has been refined and re-named as the “Congregational Assessment of Development/Decline Status” (CAD/DS). The biggest improvement is a better display of the results, which indicates more clearly various areas of congregational life needing attention. These could lead a congregation to various *re:Vitality* modules. This survey is available to all LCMS churches on a no-cost, no-obligation basis.

The *Connect to Disciple* (CTD) outreach module has been re-worked so it can be done on a self-directed basis, not unlike *Every One His Witness*. If you prefer, however, CID still has facilitators who can come to your congregation at no cost and conduct a *Connect to Disciple* workshop. Release of the free self-directed version will be soon, but a few last “bugs” need to be addressed first. I will tell you when to expect it.

*Serving God’s Mission*, the strategic planning module, is currently in beta testing. In fact, the Synod’s Office of National Mission could use a few more beta-test churches. You won’t have the “polished” version of the materials if you are a beta tester, but you could get your hands on them quickly. If you are interested, or know someone who is, please let me know as soon as you can.

Finally, *Shepherding our Strays*, the module on inactive members, is also nearing completion. For a short online video preview of *Shepherding our Strays*, go to

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/34cmj1hyeekncwa/SO%20Promo.mov?dl=0>



Circuit Witness and Outreach Workers

### Worth Considering – **The Fact of Death**

The coronavirus pandemic brought death to the doorstep for a lot of people. Many, of course, did die. For many others, the fact of death became much more than a faint, distant blip on the radar.

In a recent issue of the magazine *First Things*, Reformed theologian Carl Trueman wrote of the need for factual thinking and talk about death. There is nothing new about this need, yet in some definite ways it stands out as acute within contemporary culture. For nightly mortality statistics on television newscasts have, at least in part, punctured the sheathing of denial about death with which our society usually wraps itself.

The glorification of youth, including an obsession with sexual activity, has been with us for some time. Now come the latest advancements in anti-aging, from physical exercise to cosmetic surgery. Are we as a people trying to live under an illusion that we need not face grim physical facts?

Our society is coming unglued from physical facts at a dizzying pace these days. De-coupling gender from biological sex forms a prime case in point, so that your physical body need not get in the way of your own deeply-felt identity. Who *you are* becomes decisively determined by who *you want to be*, which can change. Recently, as I was about to donate blood, a representative of the Red Cross asked me what my gender identity was *that day*.

People can act as if the biological fact of being male or female amounts to an imposition. Flying in the face of facts to assert yourself can be one way of trying to prove that you are boss over reality.

Just try to win an argument with death, though.

In his article, Trueman rightly pointed out that death provides an opportunity for Gospel witness. Why should we be surprised? For centuries Christians have known that, say, when their neighbor's spouse died, this was a good time for

them to speak the Good News about Jesus. No one needed 1980s and '90s Church Growth analysts to come up with that thought.

But the fact of death also raises the opportunity for witness in principle, as it were. Seeing death on the horizon will always cause people to wonder about the meaning of life. Has the Gospel lost its relevance? Not so long as people are dying!

Death is more than an unwanted imposition, the Bible says. It is an intruder, an enemy. God did not want it in or for His creation, which makes its presence in the world even more tragic.

Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He did so although He knew that He was about to bring Lazarus back. Death is an enemy. Christians still grieve over loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus . . . yet not as those who have no hope.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life," said our Lord. "He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." He asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" The Gospel of John – and, really, the whole Bible – was written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 11:25-26; 20:31). This is our message: life from the dead, no less, in the Christ Who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25).

As our churches continue "coming back" after recent events, what could be more important to tell people who will lose their arguments with death? Christ has defeated death! That's the fact.

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