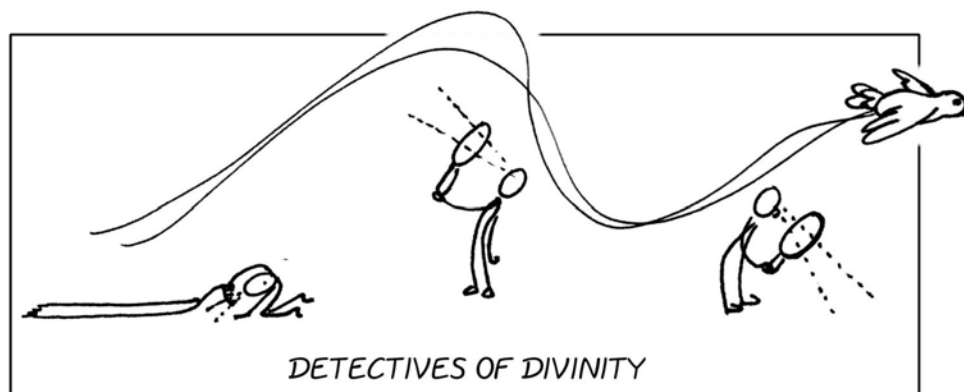


Chapter 4

The case of the reluctant seminary class

Getting started

We have often taught a course at Luther Seminary called Reading the Audiences. It is a class about learning everything you can in one semester about a congregation – its history, its practices, its members, its physical location, its nearby neighbors – in order to discern what God is doing in that place and what missional vocation that congregation might have. The students are to become “detectives of divinity.” Students in their first year of seminary must take this required course, and it has the reputation of being a lot of work.



Imagine their surprise when, in the first class meeting, we spend the first half hour dwelling in the Word – in Philippians 1:27 and 2:5-11, the “Christ Hymn.” The Christ Hymn is our story for this course because the students will have the mind of Christ Jesus, the mind of a slave, on behalf of the congregation they are getting to know. Here is the passage:

Philippians 1:27, 2:5-11 (NRSV)

1:27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

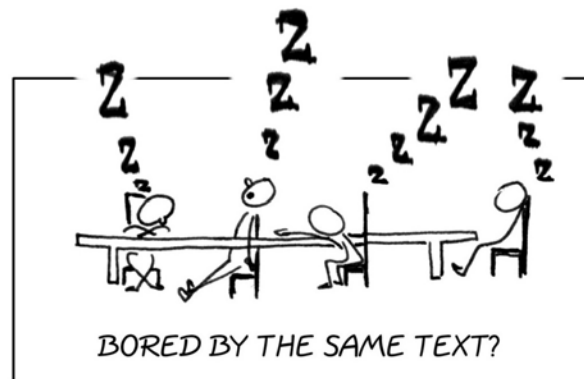
11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

On the first day, students are usually a little nervous or anxious, and this activity puzzles them. Perhaps it seems odd because they need to be quiet and listen for the Spirit when they have a fair amount of nervous energy and anticipation. Perhaps it seems odd because they have to meet a stranger and listen to what that stranger says, reporting back what that person has said without reporting back their own idea, something seminary students can find difficult to do. Of course it is a good way to introduce everyone in the class to everyone else, and it allows everyone to participate with very little pressure, and it values every contribution equally, not allowing anyone to monopolize. But this quietly reflective practice seems quite unconnected with the course's reputation for arduous work.

The students receive and read the course syllabus, they learn about their assignments, and they begin to establish their small work groups and select their congregation for the study project. They even take an online tour of the *Church FutureFinder* site into which they will place the information they discover about their congregation and its community. These activities they understand and expect in a first day of class.

When the class next meets, once again we open by dwelling in the Word, the same passage. We explain that story is a narrative of the course and their work within it. They find a new partner and share, demonstrating their ability to listen and report without placing too much of their own reflection into that report, but they are puzzled by the return to the same text. Then they hear a lecture and they work in their groups, solving some already emerging difficulties in the congregational study they are beginning together.

At the third class meeting, once again we open by dwelling in the Word, the same passage. They find yet another new partner and hear yet another view of the Christ Hymn, sometimes quite different from anything they've heard or reported before, and sometimes both partners will have been struck by the same word or phrase and led into a conversation out of which each can hardly separate one person's insights from the other's. Some students begin asking aloud at this point, "Why this same passage every week? Surely scriptures are rich and this is a very limited way to explore them." Some are just wondering; others are becoming irritated.



“Not this again!”

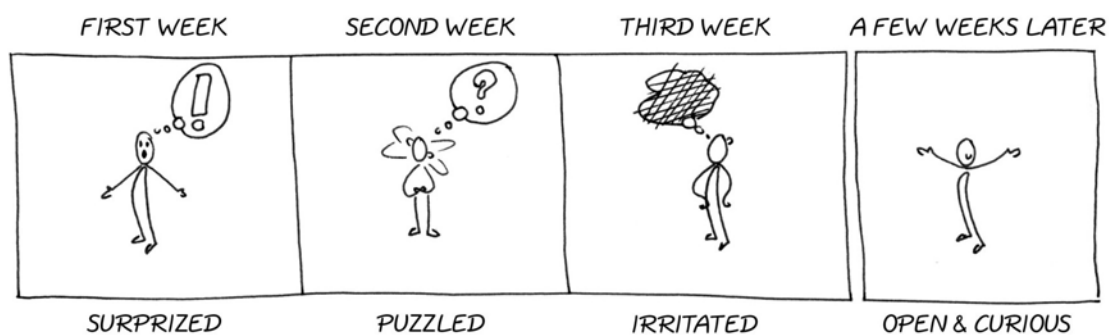
By the fourth or fifth class meeting, when the work in the class has become heavy, when each group member is stretched by the amount of work in our course and others as well, when interviews in congregations are tough to schedule and a walk-through in the congregation's neighborhood didn't happen because someone's child was ill or someone's car didn't start, and frustrations are mounting, we still open the class by dwelling in the Word, the same passage. Class members have met quite a few fellow students in the practice by now, listening them into free speech on the Christ Hymn and be-

ing caught in various places, not always agreeing but mostly listening pretty well. But it is clear that most of the students at this point would rather have that half hour to meet and check signals with their group rather than spend time in the same passage yet again. They are frustrated with us for insisting upon the practice.

Also, by this time one or two students have stopped reporting the words of their partner and just begun saying what they themselves think. One of the instructors or even one of the other students will sometimes call them on this practice error, noting that, if they don't report their partner's insights, the group will be missing something. Even if the group is too timid to insist aloud at the moment on proper practice, they do note it when it occurs. Many times in students' private reflection papers later in the course, this failure of one student or another to dwell through the mind of the other is noted as a loss, a deficiency, for the group.

Somewhere along about the 7th or 8th week in the semester, the completed study is due. All of the frenzied work is complete, and the students begin scheduling a time when they can meet with a group in the congregation to share what they've learned and to ask some reflection questions of congregation leaders. This preparation is happening behind the scenes, and in class we give lectures and host discussions meant to help the student groups to interpret what they have been learning as "detectives of divinity." They are to take their learnings and their questions to the congregational group as slaves to the congregation, slaves who, by their work, free the congregation members to see their church in a new way, see their church as newcomers see it, see potential missional vocations and what God might be up to in the congregation and in the community outside its walls.

But still, at the start of each class meeting, we open the class by dwelling in



the Word, the same passage. And it is at this point (for one or two, a week or so earlier) that several students will dwell, remain silent, open, in extended prayer, and then share with the class their place that week of being “caught” by the Spirit. In fact, their tone has changed. They are surprised but delighted that this one story is still “catching” them, and in unusual ways. They cannot believe it has so much to say, especially given the fact that the passage is not strange to them; they had heard it many times even before that first class period. But it is only now that they begin to be curious about where and how it is striking others in the class. They hear familiar patterns and new ones, too. They see the various theological lines of their classmates working, working, working through the story of Jesus’ slavehood to humankind. They grapple with the baggage that the word slave brings with it, they know one another well enough to argue a little about that, and the 30 minute practice sometimes swells to 40 or 50 minutes.

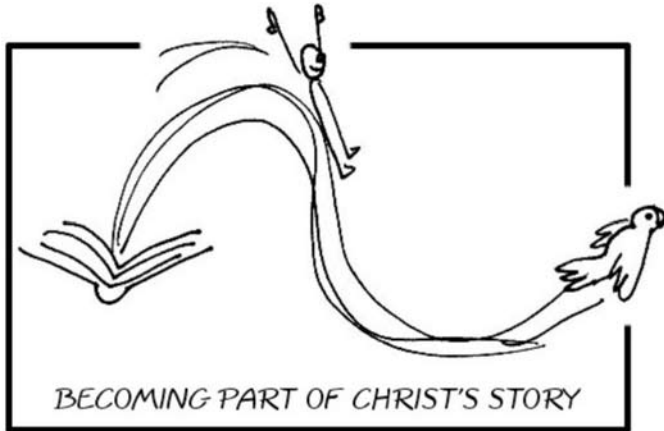
Taking the practice to others

Finally it is time for each student group to make a formal presentation and conversation with the members of the church they have been learning about. Many of those groups begin that meeting by dwelling in the Word, the same passage. And they are sometimes confronted by church members cutting them off, saying, “We came for a presentation. What is this Bible study?” They are surprised! But they behave as slave to their congregational group, delivering to them what they learned and inviting the church members to interact, provide more knowledge, fill in blanks, and even respond to theological reflection questions about what God may be up to in their church and neighborhood. Some of the church members never get the students’ purpose in dwelling in the Word (not the same as Bible study, actually), but others begin to see the connection.

At last, the students do an in-class presentation about how the congregation meeting went and what they learned. They also write a reflection paper about the process, and sometimes dwelling figures in these pieces of their work, especially if they’ve tried to do it with the church leaders and either succeeded or failed.

A chance to reflect

But students also write a final paper on missional leadership and what God is up to. And in at least 70% of the papers, dwelling in the Word is mentioned as a rich and simple practice that students have learned bears fruit



for them in their group work and in their personal lives. They mention their original reluctance to stay in the same story, until the story takes them over and becomes their story and they become part of Christ's story.

In the end they don't believe this would have happened if we had hopped around into

various passages. And they can see how it draws all people in to participate without placing much of a burden on them, no matter their mother language or level of education, for one reflection may have as much insight as another. Just as, in the Christ hymn, Christ opens up the community of God to all people, so they open up the community of believers to all people through this hospitable and welcoming practice. They live the Christ Hymn by dwelling in it.