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Can Anything Good Come Out of _____? Come and See!
Faithful Witness in Marginality and Hospitality

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46a). Nathanael wonders if God can work his salvation from Galilee. According to human expectations, the Messiah is supposed to come from a higher and holier place like Jerusalem, not from such a lowly and unholy place like Nazareth in Galilee. But God surprises us. "Come and see!" (v. 46b). Philip invites Nathanael to see not with the eyes of the flesh, but with the eyes of the Spirit.

It is precisely from such an unlikely marginal place that the Messiah welcomes sinners into God's gracious kingdom by saving them from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. How might such a story help us to engage neighbors out there who can relate to experiences of marginality and hospitality? Furthermore, how might such a story help us to witness faithfully to these neighbors, so that they might see their experiences anew in the light of God's justification in and through Christ?

In this essay, I argue that our shared human experiences of community and marginality with various neighbors in the world, whether Christian or not, can help us read the Christian story through a fresh lens—in particular, with a view towards people who crave a welcoming hand and suffer hostility and alienation in our communities. Moreover, I argue that these common experiences of belonging and exclusion, of hospitality and marginality, can in turn be illumined, deepened, and transformed by the Christian story in service to a faithful witness to the gospel.

I am asking a two-way question: What can the church learn from her neighbors as she listens to and lives among them? And then, what can neighbors learn from the church as she speaks and lives out the Christian story in their midst? This is the movement of our engagement, first listening and learning, and then speaking and teaching. Faithful witness encompasses both areas. We can think of the former as preparatory in scope or centripetal in trajectory, and the latter as evangelical or centrifugal in aim.

Two Kinds of Signs

As an initial way to frame the questions posed above, I want to appeal to the Apology's distinction between what I have come to call "two kinds of signs."[1] Let us

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look at the key text from Apology XIII, which deals more specifically with the number and use of the sacraments.

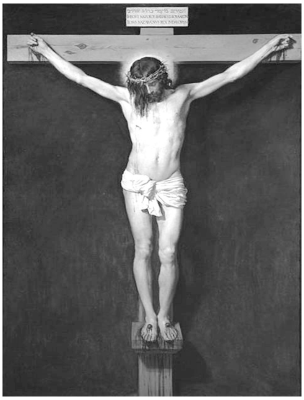
> If we define the sacraments as rites, which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added, it is easy to determine what the sacraments are, properly speaking. For humanly instituted rites are not sacraments, properly speaking, because human beings do not have authority to promise grace. Therefore, signs instituted without the command of God are not sure signs of grace, even though they perhaps serve to teach and admonish the common folk.[2]

Admittedly, the Apology's distinction is more concerned with distinguishing human rites from divine sacraments in order to console consciences with the forgiveness of sins delivered in God's instituted signs of grace. Less developed, however, is reflection on the other "signs instituted without the command of God." The Apology suggests that such signs and their use are not necessarily bad, as long as they are not equated with or obscure the gospel delivered in the sacraments. The text notes that "humanly instituted rites" or "signs" may "perhaps serve to teach and admonish the common folk." They may have a pedagogical purpose in service to the gospel.

So what are these other signs? One example of such a "sign" is the crucifix. We may also speak of the sign's use as its accompanying humanly instituted "rite." In this case, neither the sign nor the rite is a divinely instituted sacrament. We are not commanded by God to have or use a crucifix in the church or at home in order to receive God's grace and mercy in Christ. Having established this central claim of the Apology, we can then ask further: Can the crucifix, or some other artistic representation of the cross, become a useful sign to engage the common folk out there? Can folks out there relate to such a sign in some way in light of their experiences?

For instance, can a person who has experienced hostility and loneliness relate to the fate of the one who hangs on the cross? Could that engagement with a neighbor who is hurting in turn help to remind the church of her own cross-shaped identity, that is, her experience of marginality in a world hostile to the gospel? Finally, can the church's experiences of alienation and rejection she shares with others out there—even if for different reasons—in turn help to deepen her Christian witness to these neighbors? Perhaps through a ministry of solidarity with and support for marginalized peoples in the community, or through the proclamation of the hope of the cross that justifies people by welcoming them into God's kingdom. Listening and learning, speaking and teaching—in these examples, the sign and rite, though not commanded by God, is used pedagogically and evangelically as we walk together with and hear our suffering neighbors in their pains, and bring the hope of the cross to their situation.

An historic example of and insight into the potential use of the sign of the cross is in order. Consider Spanish painter Diego Velásquez's portrait of the crucified Christ from the year 1632. The reception of this image of the cross by the indigenous people of the Americas during the colonial era serves as an illustration of the way an artistic or



cultural sign evokes experiences shared by the common folk. Velásquez's portrait vividly showed the blood of Christ dripping from his head, hands, feet, and side. The symbol spoke to the colonized. Given their experiences of marginality and hostility at the hands of the Spanish, the Amerindians could relate directly to the suffering of the man on the cross. They could see their own painful experiences reflected in that image of Jesus, at times even apart from an explicit knowledge of him as their Savior and Lord. Through this sign, people identified with a dying Christ, one in solidarity with their own pain. Diego Velázquez's bloody Christ, and other similar depictions of the cross in the colonial era, was received as the Christ who dies and suffers with us.

Although Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) described *el Cristo de Velázquez* as the tragic image of a Christ who is "always dying without ever dying to give us life,"[3] Alberto García has argued that Velazquez's depiction of the crucified Christ does not have to be seen in a defeatist, fatalistic, or masochistic manner. While it is sometimes the case that "the crucified Christ has been misunderstood as a passive symbol of suffering and defeat," He must finally be seen more actively as the Suffering Servant "who identifies with the suffering of His people to overcome it."[4] This evangelical grasp of the sign leads us to see the cross not "as a symbol of defeat," but as "a clear signpost, a symbol, of God's active presence with us and for us. It is a clear sign that God in the person of Jesus Christ came to stand with His people in their entire human drama."[5]

Drawing from García's work on the Hispanic experience of suffering in light of the cross, Douglas Rutt has argued that the popular Latin American self-identification with the bloody Christ can be seen as an enduring catechetical legacy of the region to the whole Christian world.[6] This image of the cross inspired movements of solidarity with indigenous people groups, such as the one spearheaded by Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), who advocated for their rights and a peaceful and humane way of bringing the gospel to them.[7] All this took place at a time when the Spanish church was debating whether these Amerindians were to be considered humans created in God's image or animals and thus property. In view of this historic situation, it is not difficult to understand why some neighbors of Hispanic origin might easily identify with a Christ who is always suffering and dying.

Even though one should not reduce the experience of the cross to a sign of Christ's suffering with us, Rutt contends that the image of "the dying Christ" can still function today as "a bridge to a deeper appreciation and understanding of the message of the gospel, namely, that God in Christ identifies with and ultimately redeems us from the human condition of suffering and death."[8] The image of the Christ who is suffering with us becomes a sign that, in light of the Latin American experience of suffering, reminds an often individualistic North American church that is more focused on victories than bearing crosses to embody a ministry of accompaniment with those who experience hostility and alienation.[9] Rutt points to the common practice in North American churches to display empty crosses on altars as problematic.

Grasping the dying Christ who identifies "with his brothers and sisters in their suffering" becomes nothing less than a legacy and "gift" of Hispanic Christianity to the church—especially in the United States.[10] The implication is that the church can learn to look at the cross in light of the life of marginal peoples who have experienced hostility in the world, moving her towards a ministry of hospitality towards neighbors at the margins of church and society. In this case, the church's encounter with and work among marginalized folks serves as a corrective to her becoming too comfortable with the values of the world, to her speaking of Christ's victory on the cross while avoiding bearing the cross with suffering neighbors. Listening and learning from broken neighbors, the church deepens her own understanding of the Christian story.

At the same time, Rutt shows that the Latin American and Hispanic experience of the Christ who is dying "with us" can be deepened or illumined by the church's confession of the Christ who has already died "for us."[11] In other words, the sign of the cross can be used to teach the gospel more clearly to those without hope, helping them to move from the Christ who only suffers with them all the time to the Christ who has suffered on their behalf in order to redeem them from the alienation from God and neighbor sin brings to our lives and communities. The evangelical use of the sign of the cross serves as a corrective to a potentially fatalistic or hopeless view of life, and instead invites neighbors to see the cross in terms of God's radical and welcoming love for all people, even for those who have nothing going for them and yet put their trust in the man of the cross. Speaking and teaching the Christian story in all its fullness, the church illumines a potentially ambiguous sign with the certainty of the gospel.

An Immigrant Story

The historic example provided above shows that "humanly instituted rites," such as the common folk's appropriation of a crucifix or similar artistic representation, though not signs commanded by God, can after all serve to teach and admonish both the church and neighbors in the world as they encounter one another. Now, what if we could speak for a moment of such rites in a slightly broader context than we have so far? Not in terms of culturally appropriated artifacts or art forms, such as the image of the cross in a painting, but rather in terms of experiences and practices that embody and give meaning to our lives. What if we think of "rites" as those common and defining life "experiences," and the practices or "rituals" accompanying them? Real life images, as it were, teaching us something about ourselves, both about our human aspirations and struggles.

Two such human experiences are hospitality and marginality, being invited and being left out. As humans created by God for communion, we crave belonging and acceptance. All of us share a common need for friendship, for being included, and thus value welcoming and being welcomed. Hospitality is the practice or ritual that speaks to those aspirations of the human family. But we also experience alienation, isolation, betrayal, and hostility. And, unfortunately, at times we practice such values too, thus showing the dark, sinful side of the human race, the worst in us. We thus feel connect-ed to others through friendship and the hand of welcome, but also feel marginalized from others when rejected and excluded.

While these experiences are common to all humans, there are also certain groups of people whose lives bring a higher degree of awareness to them. Immigrants are one such group. They experience hospitality and marginality, welcome and hostility, and have to navigate discourses about who belongs and who does not. Are they in or out? When I first came to the United States as an immigrant, I experienced signs of hospitality. For two years, I lived with a family of farmers in the Midwest who welcomed me with open arms in a new country. They took care of this stranger in their midst. Over time, I became one of them, as it were. When they asked me to partake in the regular family rituals of toilet and pigsty cleaning with the rest of the children, I realized right away that I had become a member of the family!

We entered reciprocal relationships in the neighborhood for the common good. Many teachers and students at the local high school often went out of their way to make me feel included and valued as a member of the learning community. Above all, it was by partaking in the rituals of weekly concert, marching, jazz, and pep band rehearsals and performances that I experienced a very strong sense of belonging and community in a strange land. We created music together, which required listening to one another. We needed each other's contributions in order to make music. But I also experienced subtle and crass signs of hostility and alienation in the community. I was reminded that I was not fully in, that I was a stranger after all. I was reminded that I had an accent; in the worst cases, discriminatory jokes and remarks were made against me or people who talked and looked like me. I was not one of them.

Experiences of hospitality and marginality, stories about who belongs and who does not, words about who is in and who is out—experiences immigrants typically go through. As the church meets neighbors in these spaces of hospitality and marginality, and listens to their hopes and struggles, what can she learn from their life stories? And then, how can the church's story, the Christian story, deepen or illuminate these experiences with the gospel?

Learning from a Life Story

To answer those questions, might it not be especially helpful to hear from theologians, whether lay or professional, whose life experiences in the world have made them especially aware of the pain of exclusion and the gift of community? What about exploring some insights from theologians who are themselves immigrants, or members of ethnic or linguistic minorities, or who have lived and worked among such neighbors on a fairly regular basis? By focusing on their experiences of exclusion and welcome, we might learn broader lessons about the human condition that apply to others beyond members of a particular group and begin to ask how the Christian story speaks to such situations.

In his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans offers six different ways to think through the relationship between the church and the world. One way is the transcendental model, which starts with "the authenticity of the subject who is trying to express his or her experience as a person of faith and a person in a particular context."[12] In the transcendental model, "the best person to do theology within a particular context is the subject of that context as such."[13]

Parting from particular life experiences, theologians then reflect on what these mean in light of the Scriptures and their theological tradition. Broader lessons are then drawn for others, both for the saints in the church and neighbors in the world. The model moves from the particular to the general, from the individual or communal to that which humans share in common.[14] Using this approach, we may say that the experiences of hospitality and marginality of particular individuals or communities in which the theologian lives and works have a broader application. Such events have significance beyond the individuals or communities originally involved, and thus transcend at some level the original context in which such experiences arose.

Bevans suggests a horticultural or garden image to sum up what the transcendental model entails. As he puts it, "a person can be inspired to work in his garden because of the example—or lack thereof—from others working in their own gardens."[15] Applying this insight to our concern, we may argue that Christians can learn much about interacting with people in the world who are marginalized and crave friendship when they see and hear from brothers and sisters who have those aspirations and needs on a consistent basis, when they live and work most closely among them, and/or when they themselves come from those communities.

Take for instance the Hispanic experience of *mestizaje*, that is, the coming together of races and cultures as a result of the conquest and colonization of the Americas. Justo González, Protestant Hispanic historian and theologian, has reflected on what such an experience of Hispanic origins—one that is not without its fair share of violence—means not only for Hispanics but also for the church at large today. While unique to Hispanics, González argues that the experience of mestizaje transcends Hispanic culture. It has implications for others. If so, we have an example of Bevans's transcendental model at work.[16]

González has argued that being a Hispanic or *mestizo* Christian is an ambivalent, both/and reality, a bittersweet event.[17] Bittersweet because mestizaje resulted from a violent evangelization, in which the cross and the sword went hand in hand. In other words, mestizaje comes from a painful experience of hostility and shame, an experience of marginality. But, being a mestizo is also and ultimately, under the sign of the cross, a sweet event. A new creation still came about in spite of violence and death. Life out of death. By his mysterious design, God brought together into one a new people, extending his mercy to outsiders, transforming their shame into the joy of being brought into the family of God, an experience of divine embrace to be celebrated. God's inclusion in his kingdom breaks into fiesta. In the new creation, outsiders are invited to have fellowship with the Lord and partake of his meal.

González's hymn "*De los cuatro rincones del mundo*" ("From the Four Corners of the Earth") sums up well what the theologian sees as the broader implications of the experience of mestizaje for the church, her identity and hope. The first stanza reads:

From the four corners of the earth
Flow the blood in these veins
Of these peoples who sing their pains,
Of these peoples who speak their faith;
Unwitting blood brought from Spain,
Noble blood of the suffering native,
Strong blood of the oppressed slave,
All blood surely bought on the cross.[18]

Here González reimagines the Hispanic experience of mestizaje, the coming together of the blood from many continents to form a new people, as a sign in creation of the church catholic that is gathered from "the four corners of the earth." One notes how, for the hymn writer, the Hispanic experience of mestizaje deepens the church's understanding of her own identity as a catholic or universal church, which in turn reminds her to live according to her identity as a global church of many languages and cultures. The church learns that she herself is mestizo. She is neither monocultural nor monolingual.

At the end of the stanza, note also how the church's understanding of her catholicity or mestizo identity in turns illuminates the Hispanic experience of meztizaje, making it clear to people who experience hostility and shame from others because of their skin color, ethnicity, accent, or language that the gospel is for all nations, all ethnic and language groups. We see how the gospel also deepens the experience of mestizaje, giving it a fresh meaning in light of the cross. Christ shed his blood to redeem all blood. Another stanza reads:

From the four corners of the earth,
From the flowery fields of Cuba,
From Asia and the coast of Africa,
From Borinquen, Quisqueya, and Aztlán:
To this blessed hour has brought us
Heaven's mysterious divine design,
Which all brought together into one destiny
And from all one reign will create.[19]

In this stanza, González speaks to the experience of God's inclusion of the mestizo—again, a sign of the church catholic—into his reign. By "heaven's mysterious divine design," God brings about the mestizo people from the blood of many nations and lands. They do not only share a common destiny of pain and alienation, but also, in light of the Christ whose blood redeems all blood, a common hope of being invited and welcomed into God's kingdom. Once again, we see how the gospel deepens the experience of mestizaje in light of the cross and the hope of the new creation, going as far as calling such a human experience a "blessed hour": Sweetness out of bitterness.

Reading Through Marginal Eyes

It is now time to go to the Scriptures, the Christian story, and ask how common experiences of hospitality and marginality we share with neighbors might offer us an important lens to see insights in the biblical narratives we would otherwise miss or jump over. And then, let us ask how these biblical narratives illumine or deepen such experiences in light of the gospel. Three narratives come to mind.

Jesus the Galilean

Mexican-American Catholic theologian Virgilio Elizondo argues that Jesus is ultimately rejected, marginalized, and killed because he is the wrong kind of Jew, a Galilean Jew.[20] No self-respecting Jew expected the Messiah to come from Galilee. One recalls the words of Nathanael upon hearing of the Messiah from Philip: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46a). The expected answer at the time would have been "no." The center of God's holy presence is Jerusalem. There is where we find the temple, the righteous teachers of Israel, the pure Jews—not in Galilee. Yet God surprises us and works his salvation out of Galilee, out of the margins, as it were. Along with Nathanael, we are invited by Philip to "come and see" what God is doing out of Nazareth in Galilee (v. 46b).

Christ's disciples are also from Galilee. They include people who, like Jesus the Galilean, speak with an accent, like his disciple Peter whose accent gave him away as a follower of Jesus! (Mt 26:73). They are sent into the world to make disciples of all nations. While Jerusalem is typically seen as the center from which the gospel is to go out to the ends of the earth from Pentecost forward, according to the narrative in Acts, Galilee is actually such a central place in Matthew (28:7–10, 16)—the least likely place from which the Lord of heaven and earth might send his disciples to make disciples by baptizing and teaching (vv. 18–20). When read through marginal eyes, the story of Jesus the Galilean and his Galilean disciples bears witness to the outworking of God's power and wisdom through the cross, and this in turns allows us to see how God can work his salvation even in and out of the most unlikely places, among marginal characters with strange accents, and even use them to extend his kingdom.

Jesus Walks along the Border

Galileans and Samaritans were seen with suspicion. Galileans lived too close to Greek-speaking people and were not considered to be as pure as the Jerusalem Jews. Samaritans were worst off, the enemies of God's people, totally unfit to receive God's blessings. So goes the story. But shockingly, Jesus walks along the despised border between Samaria and Galilee (Lk 17:11). We have other marginal characters in this story too—lepers, and at least one of them, a Samaritan. Marginalized twice, this person has nothing going for him. He is unclean, an outcast.

It is interesting that, after being healed, only one out of ten lepers returned to give thanks. That person, shockingly, is the foreigner! (v. 16). The one Jews might think least likely to be brought into the kingdom is welcomed into it. Exclusion is overcome by embrace. This is a story of outsiders who are included into the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus alone. It is a story of marginality and then, through Christ, of hospitality. When read through marginal eyes, the story of the Jesus who walks along the border bears witness to the power of the gospel to save people not on the basis of their condition in life, their religious purity, cleanliness, or holiness, but on the basis of faith in Christ.

The Story of Philip in Acts

Philip is a deacon and then an evangelist among marginal characters, amidst people excluded at some level from the community because of their cultural-linguistic or ethnic-religious identity. These people include Greek-speaking Jewish widows who are not fully accepted or apparently are being "neglected" by Hebrew-speaking Jews in the distribution of food (Acts 6:1). Philip is also sent by the Spirit to Samaritans who are not seen by the Jews as worthy of receiving God's blessings (8:1–8), and to an Ethiopian eunuch who, though a God-fearer, would not have been allowed in the temple (8:27). Are these people in or out of God's kingdom?

Philip's is a story about the Holy Spirit's breaking down humanly designed barriers to bring the gospel of Christ and baptism in his name to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 2:38). This is a story of marginality and then, through the Holy Spirit, of hospitality and welcoming into God's family. The gospel has a ripple, centrifugal effect. It goes from Jerusalem to unlikely and despised places like Samaria. Such an extension of the gospel is so surprising and perhaps even shocking that an apostolic representation from Jerusalem has to go to Samaria to lay hands on the newly converted and baptized Christians in order to confirm, bear witness, or perhaps even witness themselves that the gift of the Spirit is also for such unlikely people (8:14–17).

How can these biblical narratives shape our witness? First, we recognize that neighbors out there can connect at some level with these stories. They have felt welcomed and unwelcomed. Who are those neighbors in our neck of the woods? Who are the Galileans, lepers, Samaritans, or Greek-speaking Jewish widows in our churches or communities? Christians who work among immigrants, minorities, the sick and dying, the lonely, or other marginalized groups can use these stories to connect with them. They provide some common ground for listening and learning about the struggles and needs of neighbors. They provide a common human story, as it were, to engage those who feel lonely, rejected, or outcast.

But these biblical stories also complement those experiences of marginality with the light and hope of God's grace in Christ, providing a new perspective on life for the outsiders in our midst. They are truly new stories when seen through the cross. What they offer, then, is a view of God's gracious disposition towards marginal people. The Holy Spirit moves the church outside Jerusalem to places with odd characters. Are they in or out? This is not our decision. God alone justifies them through the word and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth has extended his healing hand, the hand of hospitality and inclusion into God's gracious reign, to sinners excluded by all who boast in their own righteousness. He also makes such sinners, like Levi the tax collector, participants in his mission: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:31–32).

Deepening the Story: Speaking Justification

Some time ago, during the Epiphany season, I preached a homily on John 1:45–46 (Nathanael said to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see.") at Concordia Seminary. Let me share with you the last half of that homily as an example of an engagement between the text and the world. I approach the biblical narrative as a first-generation Hispanic Lutheran immigrant. I preach it to a predominantly Anglo audience aware of but largely detached in time from its Synod's immigrant roots, an Anglo audience that also has a heart for missions—or at least is aware of its importance—among the growing immigrant and/or ethnically diverse population of the United States. Finally, note how I use the immigrant experience of marginality to remind the church of her own marginal identity in the world and her mission to be a faithful witness to those who feel excluded from the love of God in Christ.[21] In so doing, I also remind the church of her central message for herself and for the world—namely, that God justifies not on the basis of our condition in life but on the basis of the cross. Here is a slightly edited version of the last half of the homily:

> We too are like Nathanael. At times, we are doubtful about the power of Jesus to save and transform lives among strange people and in places where we least expect it. Can anything good come out of_____ (fill in the blank)? When we do so, we see with the eyes of the flesh, we do not see Jesus at work in the most unlikely places. We are a bit suspicious or cautiously optimistic. We are no longer open to being surprised by God's power among unlikely folks and places.
>
> But when we trust in God as people called by Jesus, and see life with the eyes of the Holy Spirit, the eyes of faith, we are more like Philip in the text for today. We see Jesus in Galilee. We are pleasantly surprised and can see God's salvation at work in places where at first it seemed odd or impossible to find his power and wisdom.
>
> Who are some of the Galileans of our time? Yes, God is working even among peoples with strange accents and customs, from strange places, people who do not always neatly fit into our cultural norms or congregational life, whom God has called to serve in the church to bring the gospel of life to a hurting world. Jesus is at work in modern Galilee and is blessing our church through modern Galileans from strange lands, bringing God's word and new life against all odds in places where some Lutheran congregations are even wondering if they should close their doors.
>
> Sometimes we forget that our Lord came from Galilee and that the church is at its very core a bunch of Galilean people. Modern Galileans with accents remind Lutherans in the United States of their own origins, for the Lutheran church too was once a church of Galileans with accents and strange customs and traditions . . . And yet God worked his salvation through these Germans and through their descendants has brought the gospel of life to many of us sitting here today.

> But more than that, the modern Galileans with accents also remind us of our own Christian identity, for the church has always been a little group of strange Galilean disciples that does not speak or act like the world does. What is the church but a little Galilean flock that is ridiculed and persecuted by the world because it sings to a different tune and walks to a different drumbeat? To the world, you sound like a people with strange accents and customs. And yet God has revealed his salvation, his power and wisdom, for the sake of the world, through people who in the eyes of the world are nothing, insignificant, weak, and foolish. Through you.
>
> Through modern Galileans like our Hispanic Lutheran brothers and sisters—and yes through Philip—God is inviting us again to be the Galilean church he has called us to be, the community where God still does surprising and mighty things in unlikely places and through unlikely people like you.
>
> Hey Philip: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Out of Galilee? Well yes, Nathanael. Yes. Open your eyes. It is happening right now, right here . . . in this old Lutheran church. “Come and see.” It’s a Galilean Epiphany! [22]

Let me suggest that all the biblical stories shared above function as stories of God’s justification in and through Christ. They remind us of what Oswald Bayer once called “the ontological significance of justification,”[23] which means that every single human being seeks to be justified by someone, and therefore justify his or her own life in this world. As Bayer puts it: “It is not true that judgment is an addition to being. What I am, I am in my judgment about myself, intertwined with the judgment made of me by others.”[24] Even the claim that I do not need to be justified by anyone is itself yet another attempt at justification. Ultimately, neither reason nor works, neither theodicy nor praxis, can justify us, but only God’s unconditional word of justification in Christ.[25]

In our reading of the biblical narratives through marginal eyes, we are reminded that people are not brought into God’s kingdom because of their language, culture, ethnicity, place of origin, or any other condition in life. Man is not justified by these things, but only through faith in Christ. Without saying the word “justification” once, all these stories of God’s welcoming inclusion of marginal characters into his kingdom through Christ teach us that man is not deemed worthy or unworthy of the kingdom on the basis of his pedigree, but on the basis of God’s mercy in Christ. This realization radically shapes how we live among and interact with people who are marginalized, leading us to embrace the apostolic teaching on hospitality with new vigor.

In conclusion, we may ask: What other marginal spaces can we learn from and in turn illumine or deepen experiences of hostility and hospitality today with the message of God’s sure sign of justification in Christ? To name a few relatively recent groups in our collective memory, I think of Christian minorities being persecuted in Iraq and other parts of the world, who are experiencing the care and hospitality of humanitarian agencies and Christian groups. I think of unaccompanied minors along the United

States-Mexico border, including Christians, who are in many cases fleeing persecution in their own homelands, and are caught in the middle of a heated national debate on immigration law and reform that, though important, seems to go nowhere and often vilifies these minors. And yet, they are still experiencing in many cases the hospitality of people in the United States through social agencies, including Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services working in partnership with individuals and congregations nationwide. Closer to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, I think of Ferguson, Missouri, where we have seen both signs of hostility and hospitality, alienation and community, including an outpouring of Christian support for suffering neighbors through prayer, donations, advocacy, and community dialogue. These responses of solidarity in listening and then speaking become, in the light of Christ, a mirror that reflects our Lord's self-identification with suffering people and invitation to them to taste and see his salvation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that faithful witness in hospitality and marginality will include first listening and learning from the ambiguous signs, rites, or experiences of marginal neighbors in our midst who find no ultimate justification for life in this world. This stage is critical, even if preparatory in scope and centripetal in trajectory. It promotes a certain concern for and solidarity with suffering neighbors, as well as a holy discontent with the alienation sin creates among them in our churches and communities. Secondly, such witness will include speaking and teaching in such marginal spaces, deepening shared experiences of exclusion and welcome in this world with the Christian story. Such encounters will lead to opportunities for admonishing the folk by calling them to repentance those who boast in their righteousness, but also for proclaiming the gospel of justification to sinners who crave for the kingdom, and for embodying a life shaped by the gospel in service to the neediest in our midst.

At an institutional level, such life will include models of church and ministry that thrive not only in places of material abundance, but also in marginal places. It will include strategic ways of highlighting the contributions of folks in borderlands regions to the church at large, including their theological and pastoral reflections on the Christian story and its implications for catechesis, worship, mission, service in society, and life together.[26] At every opportunity, the church will be invited to come and see what the Lord is doing in today's Galilee, wherever that may be. She will be invited to walk with Jesus along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and see how Jesus heals and restores lives where no one else wants to show up. She will be invited to move outside of her Jerusalem comfort zone and behold what the Holy Spirit is doing in Judea, Samaria, and other unlikely places not only abroad, but also in the borderlands of our own backyards. This is the evangelical stage of a faithful witness proper, centrifugal in its content and aim.

Endnotes

[1] Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Theology in Context: Music as a Test Case," *Concordia Journal* 38/3 (2012): 211–213.

[2] Apology of the Augsburg Confession XIII, 3, *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

[3] Alberto L. García, "The Witness to the Cross in Light of the Hispanic Experience," in *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*, ed. Alberto L. García and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002). García cites Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense in Humanity and the People* (189–190).

[4] Ibid., 192.

[5] Ibid., 193.

[6] Douglas L. Rutt, "Luther, Tentatio, and Latin America," *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 19/1 (Epiphany 2010): 7–11 (esp. 10–11). This LOGIA issue highlights theological contributions from Latin American and US Latino Lutheranism, was produced in partnership with the Center for Hispanic Studies (CHS) of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and guest edited by its director, Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

[7] Ibid., 8.

[8] Ibid., 10–11.

[9] Ibid., 11.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 106.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 107. According to Bevans, "this model rests in the conviction that while every person is truly historically and culturally conditioned in terms of the content of thought, the human mind nevertheless operates in identical ways in all cultures and at all periods of history . . . No matter where one knows or when one knows, one begins to process in experience, organizes this experience by means of concepts, judges the truth or falsity of one's conceptual understanding in judgment, and integrates the knowledge arrived at in judgment by means of a decision."

[15] Ibid., 108.

[16] Ibid., 113–116. Bevans includes González under this model, highlighting his proposal to deepen major themes in the Christian tradition by looking at them through Hispanic eyes. Bevans focuses on Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

[17] See Justo González's address delivered at the 1st Hispanic National Convention of the LCMS in *Under the Cross of Christ—Yesterday, Today, and Forever: Reflections on Lutheran Hispanic Ministry in the United States* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 2004), 23–46.

[18] Justo L. González, "De los cuatro rincones del mundo" (#450), in *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998 (translation mine).

[19] Ibid. (translation mine)

[20] Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983). See also Timothy Matovina, ed., *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 143–186.

[21] North American theologians have also asked what ethnic immigrants might teach the whole church in the United States. See, for example, Mark Griffin and Theron Walker, *Living on the Borders: What the Church Can Learn from Ethnic Immigrant Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004). Drawing on the work of Virgilio Elizondo, the authors argue the church in the United States should see herself as a "rooted diapora" or "borderlands culture." This ecclesial identity, which is analogous to the identity of immigrants as borderlands peoples, will preserve the church from falling into either an increasing privatization of her faith (complete isolation) or a growing capitulation to the values of a consumerist society (complete assimilation).

[22] For the video and audio of the full homily and a discussion of its intended audience and goal with Dr. David Schmitt, Gregg H. Benidt Chair in Homiletics and Literature at Concordia Seminary, go to The Preacher's Studio section of ConcordiaTheology.org. The link is: http://concordiatheology.org/2013/04/the-preachers-studio-leo-sanchez.

[23] Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xi–xiv.

[24] Ibid., 4.

[25] Ibid., 9–25.

[26] For more reflections and proposals on how The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) could incorporate the lives and insights of members and church workers from marginal spaces or borderlands regions into their mission, vision, planning, and structure, see the final sections of my two previous articles "The Global South Meets North America: Confessional Lutheran Identity In Light of Changing Christian Demographics," Concordia Journal 37/1 (2011): 47–54, and "Toward and Ecclesiology of Catholic Unity *and* Mission in the Borderlands: Reflections from a Lutheran Latino Theologian," *Concordia Journal* 35/1 (2009): 31–32.