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Naming the Gospel

Plantinga and Gloer on Discovering Grace

by Nate Van Denend, contributing editor

Going into the worship symposium I was looking for a seminar that would justify the more than 30 hours I have spent this month reading the *Harry Potter* series. Plantinga and Gloer's seminar entitled *Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching* seemed to fit the bill. Waves of affirmation washed over me as Plantinga commented in his opening remarks that a good reading schedule "improves the preacher's diction... especially well written children's literature." Surely my reading of *Harry Potter* was time well spent.

Yet *Harry Potter* was not referenced. Instead, Plantinga and Gloer discussed a wide variety of literary genres: children's books, short stories, classic novels, biographies, histories, and poetry. They referenced authors such as O'Connor, Steinbeck and Frost. They also referenced works such as Kafka's *The Trial*, *Silence*, and *April 1865*. They were looking for glimpses into the human character with its joys and sorrows, its simplicities and complexities.

Plantinga and Gloer also seek out profound moments of grace. They shared a few of these moments during the seminar. By far the best was Gloer's retelling of a scene in *April 1865*. The setting is St. Paul's Cathedral in Richmond, Virginia. The war had officially ended several days earlier. The church is packed with former confederate military officials and soldiers. The story climaxes with General Robert E. Lee kneeling at the altar next to an elderly former slave, each with hands outstretched, waiting side by side. Waiting to receive the Body that was broken for them. Gloer then stated to his mesmerized audience "There is Gospel here."

Prof. Rottman says in his preaching classes that one of the jobs of the preacher is to be able to name the work of God in the world. When debating Prof. Leder on this point in the seminar *What Shapes the Sermon?* Prof. Rottman was confronted by Prof. Leder's claim that the only actions of God of which we can be sure are those written in the Old and New Testaments. Not even the over-throwing of apartheid in South Africa can be named with a high degree of confidence as an example of God working in our world. One can only conclude from this that the confidence level for naming the action of God in a novel would be zero. Yet, this is what Gloer and Plantinga are arguing. There are stories, both fiction and nonfiction, read stories, told stories and experienced stories, which speak the Gospel, and which point directly to the actions of God. The story in *April 1865* is one such story.

But what do we see in a story such as the one told in *April 1865*? Do we get a special revelation about special grace poured out on a specific black man and a specific white

man? No. Have we gained insight into the eternal status of two souls? No. We see the characteristic footprint of the gospel: forgiveness, repentance, and grace all taking place at the foot of the Cross.

The reason we can see the footprint of the gospel has to do in part with the way the story was told. Gloer did not stand up and say, "You know, one time after the civil war Robert E. Lee took communion with a former slave." Instead, he pulled us into the story. Everyone in the room could feel the tension and found themselves on the edge of their seats. Gloer also interpreted the story so that the Gospel message could be seen there. He named the action of God in such a way that the hearers could see it and feel it. He pointed to the oft-times invisible movements of God.

Prof. Leder has a point as well, though. Too often have Christians sided with political movements. We are so tempted by the offer of a Kingdom on Earth when juxtaposed with the suffering of waiting for the Kingdom of Heaven. We are so tempted by the conclusion that the Kingdom of God *is* the Kingdom of Man. We are so tempted to answer "yes" to Satan in Luke. "Yes, turn these stones into bread."

The question comes down to this, I think: Are we willing to name God's action in the world? Are we willing to retell stories, to interpret events, to name the Gospel footprint when we see it? Do we dare? Or do we retreat to watch and wait? The faithful, the martyrs, and the heretics all dare us speak.

Nooks and Crannies: The Idema Food Pantry

An Inside Look at the Seminary's Supermarket

by Chelsey Harmon

The Idema Food Pantry. It's that place downstairs you go at least once a week when you forgot your lunch or made a grocery list and then realized you lacked the money to actually buy the items on your list. It's a place that has been part of our Seminary community for over ten years. It's also something very unique to our school community. Ask any student that has gone on to do Ph.D. work somewhere else and they will probably tell you how much they miss it.

It's easy to see why the Idema Food Pantry is such a great thing. It helps over ninety Seminary families and individuals make ends meet each week by providing everything from the staple can of kidney beans or pears to the rarer jug of laundry detergent. (My personal favorite is the in-shower body lotion from Oil of Olay; you can find it in the "Health Products" cupboard by the exit) Most of the food comes from Second Harvest Gleaners; Debra Vandermeer, the current volunteer coordinator, told me that the Idema Food Pantry spends about \$150 a week on food and other items—less than two dollars per family that walks through its doors! Second Harvest Gleaners charges by the pound at 11 cents per pound, which means the Idema Food Pantry is restocked with about 1100 pounds of supplies per week. It is suggested that each family donate 1-2 dollars per week for using the Idema Food Pantry, but such donations are rare. Imagine if this wasn't the case! Think of how much *more* food we'd be able to buy if each of us did donate just a dollar. I'll tell you so you don't have to do the math: 818 pounds. Now that's a lot of Oil of Olay in-shower body lotion! The extra money could also help us buy more meat and other, rarer items.

Volunteers are also crucial to the continued viability of the food pantry. Volunteers from our very own community, (hopefully you are one of them!), pick up the food, unload it, and every Wednesday spend about two hours restocking the shelves. This is because the Idema Food Pantry is run like a co-op, meaning there is no "owner." Instead, all of the people who benefit from the services provided are required to help run it and keep it going.

Besides Second Harvest Gleaners, volunteers go to Eastern Ave. CRC's Saturday morning food program and are able to pick up a lot of fresh and in-season food (bell peppers, onions, and the like) for free. Then there is the occasional donation from some gracious family or hunting party that drop off stuff with Ina DeMoor. You know you were wondering about those pheasants and ground venison.

What you may be wondering, however, is why the shelves seem a bit barer downstairs. That's because with government budget cuts, the Idema Food Pantry lost its USDA government funding. You may also be wondering what's going to happen in the future with the Idema Food Pantry leadership. Debra Vandermeer will be ending her run as volunteer coordinator this year when her husband Jeff Vandermeer graduates. It's always been difficult to find people with the time and abilities to run the Idema Food Pantry, and with some of the challenges such a position faces, Student Senate and the Administration has decided to make the Idema Food Pantry and Clothes Closet Coordinator a paid, year-round position.

This is an exciting change to the way things are done downstairs, but it will not change the fact that the Idema Food Pantry depends on our volunteering to keep it running. So I encourage you to continue to faithfully do your part downstairs, and to consider whether or not you know someone that would do a good job as Coordinator. Information will be posted on the Student Senate bulletin board soon! And next time you go downstairs to grab some food for lunch, don't forget to put your dollar in the bucket. If you can buy two gourmet cups of coffee for class, you can put a dollar in to help feed your family.

Dumbledore's Secret

Rowlings' Secret a Blessing to Christians

by Ryan Schreiber

Recently author J.K. Rowling created quite a stir by announcing that the headmaster of Hogwarts and wizard mentor of Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, is gay.

I am going to take what might be an unpopular position on the issue and say this: *it is a good thing that our friend Albus is gay.*

I should say at some point that I speak here as a member and representative of a community of Christian people from the Reformed tradition; and for all you CRC folk, let me also say that nowhere here will I deviate from long-held decisions and beliefs of our denomination.



Here is the CRC's stance on homosexuality: First of all, the denomination believes that homosexual people really do exist, some of whom are born homosexual and have sexual attractions that will remain locked-on to people of the same gender as long as they live. The study that the CRC pays most attention to says that between 2 and 3% of all people are *born* homosexual, with another 3% being biologically/hormonally *bisexual*.

The CRC says that while homosexual sexual activity is sinful, the church ought to minister to gays and lesbians by providing community and fulfillment for those who wish to abstain from this activity. *Being* gay does not prohibit people from joining and participating fully in the church, and "homosexual acts" can be repented from, similar to all other sexual sins. Very importantly, the CRC condemns homophobia.

While being gay is not sinful, being homophobic is.

The important things for the purposes of the present discussion about our wizard are these: *being* gay is not sinful, there are already gay folks in our communities, and we ought to do what we can to encourage these brothers and sisters and attract others into the body of Christ.

Getting back to Dumbledore, the main reason why I say it's great Albus is a gay wizard is that he provides an excellent role model for these, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dumbledore displays tremendous virtue to which both heterosexual and homosexual Christians can aspire. Albus shows that gay people can be heroic and are invaluable in the struggle against the kingdom of darkness, that they can feel remorse over sin and past failure, they can be highly competent to an excellent degree, and are worthy of respect and honor.

Dumbledore displays the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control (against such things there is no law). Dumbledore *is* an excellent character and also *has* excellent character. He has great power, but not without a good dose of humility. He knows not only his sin but also bitter remorse. He can remain free from anxiety in the most confrontational, extreme situations. He also has a great sense of humor.

Dumbledore is not obsessed with his sexuality (a feat, according to Henri Nouwen), nor does he sexualize his relationships in an inappropriate way. Just as heterosexual Christian men ought to be able to relate in a brotherly way to women they would find attractive, gay and lesbian Christians can, with the power of the same Holy Spirit, overcome this temptation that is shared by all of us, even Jesus.

As much as you can for a fictional character, I respect Albus Dumbledore for all of this virtue. I am very glad that my gay brothers and sisters can look to this wizard as an example of maturity and excellence. I am also glad that in Dumbledore we who are heterosexual can gain a gay friend if we don't have one already. In our reactions to Dumbledore, we can analyze the extent of our homophobia. And just like our brothers and sisters, we can take him on as a role model.

To be very blunt, some of the comments I have heard about Dumbledore's "coming out" are insensitive and ridiculous to a high degree (not to mention inconsistent with the CRC's position and interpretation of the Bible). We are plainly still struggling with homophobia. Besides, if Dumbledore's sexuality changes the way we read the books, what will happen to us if a friend or coworker or *child of ours* turns out to differ from sexual norms, something they cannot help or change?

My professor of pastoral care says the crowning achievement of empathy is for a heterosexual person to really walk a mile or two in a gay person's shoes. Not many of us have tried very hard. With Dumbledore, we may be able to at least entertain the idea. The goal of the Christian life is to look upon no one with prejudice, since we are all born into an evil world, but to *together* pursue the goal for which Christ Jesus first pursued us.

What's the big deal about Dumbledore being gay? I think it's great.

“Justice, Mercy, and a Humble Walk”

A Sermon on Micah 6

by Walter Miedema

Picture this:

You enter a court room. There are many people there. This is an important case. A high profile couple who everyone knows has been unable to agree on their divorce settlement. The husband has cheated on the wife many times. Everyone knows it. The trial is bound to be sensational. It is, but not in the way that you expect. The former spouses enter with their high-priced lawyers in six figure suits. They sit down. The court quiets down in anticipation of the judge's arrival. But the door behind the Judge's bench remains closed. To everyone's amazement the wife who has only recently sat down beside her lawyer stands up, puts on a judge's robe, and sits in the judge's seat. Everyone is shocked. “Who does she think she is? It's not done this way!” True, she's been wronged but this is not how justice works.

The oddity of the case does not end here, however. When it comes time for the jury to file in, what enters is not the expected well-dressed group of peers but a man who carries in a large rock, a couple piles of dirt, a few potted plants and a goldfish for good measure. When the incredulous laughter dies down the case begins. The woman, now seated in the judge's seat, addresses her former husband:

“Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Her former husband begins to speak. She cuts him off.

“Tell it to the jury, every human in the court knows what you've done, why shouldn't the rest of the creation as well.”

The man fumbles for words and then blurts out “Alright, it's true, I admit it, I cheated on you. Many times.” A communal gasp is heard. Everyone present expected this to come out eventually. But they expected admission of guilt only after the woman's lawyer had thoroughly interrogated the man.

“I have been horrible and I offer you 1 million dollars in compensation.”

“Not good enough”, replies the Judge.

“Alright, 10 million,” he counters.

“I don't want you money.”

“Alright, the yacht, the beach house, take them.”

“I'm not interested in those.”

“Oh I know, sole custody of the children.”

“A good offer but I want more.”

“It sounds as if you wouldn't be satisfied with the whole world, What do you want!”

“I want you.”

Again the court gasps as one. This tops all the strangeness they had previously seen. Why would a woman whose husband has cheated on her so many times want that husband back?

This thinly veiled allegory might help us understand how unique and bizarre the acts of God's love can be. Through Micah, God is taking Israel to court for their unfaithfulness. Because there is no higher authority than Him, He sits in Judgment and pleads his case in front of the whole creation.

God begins by listing his deeds of love toward Israel. He lists every major act and intercession he has made for them from Egypt to the time of the Judges. He has done all of this and more. As if to say “What have I done to deserve this?” He asks, “How have I burdened you?”

“I've done all this and you think I'm trying to make it difficult for you?”

Micah lays these words of God before the people. They know God's accusations are true. They have been unfaithful almost since the time the covenant with God was made. Israel is in exile and they know why.

Thinking they know what God wants Israel begins making proposals; attempts at appeasing him. Sacrifices and appeasement is what all other gods want, why not the LORD, the I Am?

Micah lampoons their efforts by at first making them pitifully small and then ludicrously large. The numbered quantities, and the size and value of what is being quantified grows exponentially.

“A few calves? No? Alright 1000 rams? 10000 rivers of oil? What do you want?”

Even to the offers that Israel could never fulfill, God Replies, “Not Interested.”

If the Israelites owe God more than they can pay, we owe God much more. God has not stopped blessing his people. In fact he has made people from all nations his people. Just as he resurrected Israel from slavery in Egypt, he has resurrected the nations from sin. God gave us his son and there is no way we can pay back a fraction of what we owe him for that sacrificial act.

Like the Israelites, we who live in today's society try to quantify and partition what we

give to God. A concept of tithing is something God put in place as a minimum and a small way we can thank God for the prosperity he has given us. A problem arises when we begin to think 10% is all we owe.

A problem also arises when quantity becomes how we judge righteousness. It is not healthy to determine a person's level of righteousness by the number of good things they do and the number of sins they avoid. Judging righteousness by how much we have done quickly becomes a burden. The standards we set quickly become too difficult to achieve. While acting this way, we begin to see God as a killjoy. God becomes a burden and we treat him as such. By doing this we cause God to ask, "How have I burdened you?" when it is really we who have been burdening ourselves.

On top of this, humanity, even those who go by the name of Christian, continue to act in unjust and unloving ways. If we examine ourselves we will see that we have not always treated our neighbors justly and with respect. At the very least we are complicit in one system or another that demeans other humans and does not allow them fully embody the image of God in which they created.

Our misdeeds and inaction are doubly condemnable when we see that we are required to love, and enjoy being kind and merciful to our neighbors. We are to treat them better than they deserve and yet sometimes we act carelessly and cruelly toward our neighbors. And we think this will make our lives better.

Like Israel we are also cheaters. We cheat on God when we run after money, power, fame or pleasure. True, these things themselves can be good in moderation, and when used for God's kingdom, but unless they are used to deepen our relationships with God and our neighbors they become dangerous temptations that can pull us away from God. We also cheat God by having rooms in our lives that we don't let Him enter. Usually these are the things that are closest to us for better or for worse. We tuck them away in the hidden corners of our hearts. In hiding these things from God we are neither humble nor close to God. We are hiding from Him. Making an offering to God from our things is an incomplete action. God wants us and He wants all of us, body, soul, heart, mind, and strength.

Shaking his head, Micah responds to Israel's inappropriate offers. "He has showed you what is good." Despite Israel's failings God has the grace to show them how to do it right. "And what does the LORD require of you?" Micah continues in an attempt to prompt the people.

He is left to finish his own sentence: "To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." Through Micah, God is saying to Israel, "I don't want your stuff, I want you." There is no need to hunt down untold riches or flocks or herds of cattle to sacrifice. There are only the requirements seeking the best for others and remaining close to God. There is no need to ask Baal and Asherah for rain. There is no need for priests to cut themselves to get God's attention (thank goodness!). There is no need for Israel to kill their children just

to make God happy, no need to suffer in order to ask a blessing from God. God will provide when something is needed because he loves Israel and has promised that he will provide.

God's promise to provide frees Israel from the tyranny of other gods. It frees them from constantly worrying if they have sacrificed enough to make these gods stop punishing them. God has made it clear in Micah 3 that he disapproves of rulers who “tear the skin from my people, and the flesh off their bones.” He also hates the prophets who “lead the people astray.” Through Micah, God promises an end to exile and a freedom from tyranny and oppression in another nation. God promises a ruler who will be completely different. He will not butcher and torture his people. He will lead them like a shepherd.

Exile has also made God seem far off. Israel had pushed God away long enough and he had responded by sending them away. What a marvelous requirement for Israel that he asks them to come close and to walk with him. God's requirement of Israel was also a renewal of his promises.

God has also freed us from the tyranny of our other gods, as well as from our own nervous hearts. He also wants to bring us back from spiritual exile. Christ's death and resurrection has made it so that we no longer have to chase after money, fame, power or pleasure. God is the only one we must chase and he is always running towards us, seeking to have us as close to Him as possible.

God still wants us in spite of all the sinning that we have done. He wants us to work for him and to care for his people and his creation. He made us stewards because he loves us and values us. And we are valuable because of his love. In his requirements of us he invites us into the privilege and responsibility of service. He is calling us to a life of difficult blessings. Each part of God's requirement is both a responsibility and a blessing. Acting justly, or doing justice as it is sometimes more literally translated, includes the idea of governing or being in charge of something. In requiring us to do justice God is calling us to be stewards. God gives us the privilege of being part of His government. Stewards are asked to govern what they do not own. Humans are the crown of creation but we do not rule by our own authority; we rule by God's authority, the authority he has given to us. God has even given us a steward, or Shepherd, to model our actions on in the person of Jesus Christ. It is not our own and to truly do justice we need to remember this. Doing justice is not limited directly to what we do ourselves. In our position as stewards we also have the God-given responsibility to see that justice is done.

Loving mercy, or kindness as it is sometimes translated, goes hand in hand with doing justice. True justice includes mercy. The word “*hesed*” which is translated “mercy” or “kindness” is one of the most important words in the Hebrew Bible. It is the closest we come in the Old Testament to a concept of grace. There are some who say it implies the sense of loving a family member as you should.

If someone committed a crime against you would want justice. But if this person was a

member of the family you would be more likely to be lenient. The love you have for your brother or sister affects how you apply justice to them. We do not always require a young child to pay for a window he has broken. God in his great "*hesed*" or mercy knew that we could not pay the debt of sin ourselves and showed us kindness. He now asks us to pass that kindness on to others. Through God our neighbors have become our family.

God's third requirement is a further blessing. He asks us to walk with Him. He asks us to walk humbly. This position of closeness is where humans were meant to be from the beginning. Adam and Eve walked with God in the Garden. But when the snake appealed to their pride and they gave in, distance was created between God and humans. In requiring this close and humble walk God is calling us back to him and bringing us close. Few of us realize how great this is. To put it in perspective imagine that your favorite celebrity called you on the phone and asked you to spend time with him or her. I think all of us would be thrilled at the opportunity and jump at the chance. God has so much more power and prestige than all the celebrities we can think of combined. And he wants us to spend not only an afternoon with Him, he wants you to spend your whole life with him. God wants you. The ruler of the universe wants you. Why would anyone in the world even think of refusing His offer?

It is true that these requirements are difficult to fulfill all the time. It is a struggle to remember what to do. It also involves engaging heart and mind in the process of relating to God and our neighbors. These requirements respect the intelligence God has given us. Loving our neighbor and our God as we should requires careful consideration. In the end, though, the difficulty and stress we face in trying to determine how best to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God pays off. Through the process God not only blesses us but also the communities and people around us.

God wants us. And this is ultimately why God wants us. He wants to bless us.

Faith is in the Cards

SemEye for the Evangelical Guy

by No One At All

With the 1998 film *Rounders* Matt Damon and Edward Norton brought poker into mainstream American culture. The decade since has witnessed the dramatic rise of online gambling and the transition of shadowy card sharks into tabloid celebrities and tabloid celebrities into overconfident gamblers with too much money and too little sense.

Following their lead millions of amateurs have learned the rules of Texas Hold'Em in the faint hopes of becoming the next Doyle Brunson or Scottie Nguyen. An unfortunate few wind up in

support groups after losing everything to the endorphin rush of the big bet. Most just lose a few bucks and a little pride. Meanwhile the industry rolls up huge profits and it's easier to find cards being played on ESPN than baseball.

Now we would not be doing our job as Reformed Christians and wannabe evangelicals if we failed to jump on a secular trend ten years after the fact, but how does one



go about redeeming a game so closely associated with addictions, alcoholism, absentee spouses, cursing, financial ruin and Las Vegas? What comfort can be offered the small child lying in bed with an empty stomach because mommy just needed one more hand to try win it all back? The answer, of course, is found in stickers.

Yes, faithful friends, there is good news to be found when the chips are down! Faith Chips are the new rage, letting bettors “ante up (and give your heart to him!)” or “call (on the name of the Lord!)” amidst the cigar-choked air of their Thursday night neighborhood game. These carefully constructed chips look and feel just like traditional clay counters, but double as tracts that no devout casino pit boss would fault you for slipping into a game here or there.

The only real question here is what exchange rate is appropriate between Faith Chips and their unsanctified counterparts. Mark 8:36 (“What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?”) would seem a cautionary tale on the back of the reds, so you had better have four-of-a-kind on the board before you push in that shiny blue John 10:28 assurance of salvation. As the manufacturer’s warranty ought to note in the fine print, Romans 10:13 (“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”) does not apply to begging for your mortgage payment back on a river inside-straight draw.

When you are ready to buy in Faith Chips are available at:

<http://www.goodnewsclothing.com/faith-chips-100pack-p-353.html>