

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“Christians are to be taught that he who sees a man in need, and passes him by, and gives [his money] for pardons, purchases not the indulgences of the pope, but the indignation of God.”- 45th Thesis

“Gather round! Gather around, friends, if you’d hear about Jesus.” Several Sundays now had passed since Ludwig’s formal introduction and he had become something of a mammoth, wooly fixture of the Wolfshausen landscape. The crowds at Vater Karl had reassumed their normal medium sparseness. Ludwig stood to Vater Karl’s left at the corner of the building that held the alehouse and their shared apartment, where he seemed an unmated column. Where the path to Gretchen’s cottage entered the square, to the left and in front of Vater Karl, Jeremiah sat lightly on Dietmärchen’s porcine rump and Gretchen’s arms framed the boy’s shoulders to the elbow. The cold had receded a bit, although a light breeze reminded the gathered it hadn’t receded far. The sky was blue and the sun low but already bright.

Normal admits a lot of strange and today, among those who had not yet gone to bed Saturday night and the regular friends of Vater Karl, the town’s twelve farm wives had taken prominent places. The women, who ordinarily dressed on Sunday for commerce and cursing their husbands wore their finest bonnets and most modest black clothes, like crows with peacock heads. “Amen!” they sang when Vater Karl called the gathering and “Amen!” they sang again after he explained the unsanctioned condition of the service.

Vater Karl was surprised by the acclaim and paused before starting the sermon. He noted Frau Braun among the women dressed for St. Elizabeth’s church in Marburg but standing in the snowy square at Wolfshausen. It occurred to him to ask Gretchen after the sermon if she’d smiled at a single man of late.

Pressing his lips together twice to warm back up, he leaned forward and began the sermon in his raspy but but soothing voice. “In the bible we hear of an apostle of the LORD’s named Thomas the Twin. When Jesus was summoned to Judea, the other apostles were afraid, because the people in Judea had tried to kill Jesus, but Thomas said bravely, ‘let us go, that we may also die with him!’”

“Amen!” chanted the chorus of farmwives as the other listeners scratched their necks or otherwise gestured incredulity and wonder.

“But when Jesus assured the apostles that they knew his destiny, and the way to follow, Thomas replied ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going and how can we know the way?’ Was Thomas not the perfect apostle? Brave and confused?”

Vater Karl paused to let his new chorus say “amen,” and after pausing itself, the chorus said just that, pious but doubtful.

“But what we remember of Thomas the most, is how he refused to believe in the resurrection until he he could see Jesus in the flesh and touch his wounds. Thomas, the twin, doubted the most important event since creation, until he could touch the evidence. The perfect apostle must also be the perfect leader, one who stands near the great occurrences and wonders whether they’re happening.

“It is said that after the Pentecost, no apostle travelled farther, spreading the word. It seems unlikely that any apostle called more gentiles to the new religion than Thomas, who is said to have preached the returned messiah to the people of Cyrus and the far Hindoo. A vigorous follower, an expeditionary leader and, before all, an unembarrassed doubter.”

“Amen.” came the reply, although quieter. The farm wives all bowed and made the sign of the cross across their agricultural chests.

“And so, my friends, we find ourselves in a time of uncertainty. As our farmers get ready to plant just as they did last year and our smith fits shoes for horses and the baker bakes and the beekeeper gets honey on his swollen hands, just as they have done forever, my friends tell me change is falling across Germany just as it did in Palestine during Thomas’ time.

“And what are we to do in this time of change? Are we to embrace change, and work for a future with no Pope?” There were no amens, but some of the crossing quickened. “Are we to dig in our heels and ask the years not to fade, should we not

invite a new generation or bid farewell to the old? Should we pray to God above to foil the spread of evangelism and the fall of regimes and preserve our Holy Mother Church, unchallenged?"

From her own place, Frau Braun's lips twisted and her eyes narrowed. She wished Heinrich were nearby so she could keep an eye on his discipline. Was this to be the day that Vater Karl went too far? All the way to apostasy? Had the evangelist from Brno persuaded the priest? Had the Devil?

Julia's plan had made sense but were they really supposed to warmly wash Vater Karl under waves of love while blasphemy after blasphemy crossed his lips? She would not go any further with Julia's scheme if Vater Karl went any further with his sermon. Maybe another plot against Vater Karl was needed. Frau Braun was afraid to listen to another word, but heard it nonetheless.

"Or are we, as Germans and Christians to follow the apostles as we have since Jesus changed Simon's to Peter? Perhaps, my friends, in these dangerous times, we should follow the example of Thomas, who, after all, followed Jesus himself across Asia. My friends, as a called and ordained priest of the Holy Church in Rome, I invite you to maintain the apostolic faith. Be brave, as Thomas the twin was brave. Wonder as he wondered. Doubt as he doubted. So, the bible teaches us, we may follow Jesus, although the road might lead to Calcutta or Odessa. It is in our wonder and our doubt, that we pause, and in our pauses become available to our neighbors in need along muddy avenues.

"As Saint Paul told the Thesallonians, test all things and hold fast to the truth. And now, my friends, may God bless and keep you, make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift you up and give you peace. Amen."

"Amen!" sang the farmwives in soprano, as the rest of the congregation muttered their own, raspier and more accustomed punctuations.

"Join me in the alehouse, friends, and the first round will be my treat."

Vater Karl went forward to retrieve the bucket in which offerings were made, but found the way blocked. Tradesmen standing near the bucket were blocked from their course to the alehouse by a procession of the well-dressed wives of local farmers. When each of the twelve reached the bucket, she would lower herself in a two-footed, outdoor version of a genuflection. And instead of the penny each was

accustomed to leaving on Sundays in the square, each released a handful of coins, crossed herself and addressed the priest with a loving “Bless you!”

Even Frau Braun, who had cursed him in the past blessed him. “Every valley shall be exalted,” he said, bowing his gratitude to the changed congregation, “and the rough places made plain.” Soon, Gretchen, Jeremiah and the pig accompanied him and the farm wives vanished.

Ludwig had gone ahead into the alehouse without a greeting.