Westhelle and Praxis: Remembering the Poor

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Praxis: asking the question, setting the stage

"Well do you have any questions? From the lecture, the readings? Anything? Nothing?" Professor Vítor Westhelle turned his head scanning the room of MDiv first-year students with a kind of hunger. One hand slowly came up. "Professor, what is *praxis*?"

Westhelle had defined for a History and Theology I class the task of theology as "the critical examination of the way in which we live and carry out our lives in light of the gospel," and "faith reflecting on *praxis*." I later realized Westhelle was drawing us into a conversation about *praxis* animating generations of theologians involved in liberation struggles. Can a term generating so much vitality and currency in past decades and previous struggles translate again for a new generation in much different cultural, political, and economic settings?

When taken out of ancient Greek and into modern languages, *praxis* marks an intentional use of communicative actions. In congregational ministry, through intentional reflection on the words of the gospel and the situation of ministry or discipleship in communities of faith, neighborhoods and workplaces, *praxis* may designate an intentional change of direction from unreflected routine into meaningful action.

For such disciples and communities of faith, the words adapted from Galatians and heard in dismissal from the liturgy, "Go in peace, remember the poor" are an opportunity to draw open the implications of scripture and worship for *praxis*. As Paul and the apostles at Jerusalem communicated across their differences, they discovered agreement that "the remembrance of the poor is at the heart of the message of the gospel," indeed it is a "shared criterion" of fellowship.[1] With fellowship in the gospel, there is an intentional change of direction, a *praxis* of everyday life: "Make the gospel available to everyone, and remember the poor."[2] That intentionality works against the forgetting of suffering, against filling up with only riches and good things, against the dismembering powers hostile to the gospel. Further, this *praxis* has implications for the sense of the disciples within the social body they inhabit: "remember the poor" calls the Christian toward "the affliction of our neighbors and of the trauma of the world" from which will arise a sense of discernment toward political action.[3]

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Juxtaposed with Westhelle's creative thought on praxis, the liturgical imperative to go in peace to remember the poor takes on a creative and disruptive foment that may propel congregations and disciples out of unreflected practice to praxis of gospel mission.

To the student's question, "What is praxis?" in that lecture, Westhelle drew on the imagery of the theater, an analogy found in his writings: "*Praxis* is what performers do on stage, their acting does not result in an objective product. The end, the telos, of *praxis* is performing for the sake of doing it well."[4] As a White and middle-class background Canadian, asking this question of *praxis* could bring up an uncomfortable comparison with the rich young man of the Gospels: "What good deed must I do to be saved?" Is there a knowledge from a past generation I could access that would infuse a saving vitality into my sense of calling, perhaps through cultivating my individual vocabulary and charismatic style for the audience of my peers?

What must not be lost in facing this uncomfortable question is Jesus' answer to the rich young man. There is with Jesus a transfer onto a different stage than that of individual ambition: "go, sell

1. Nancy E. Bedford, *Galatians. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: WJK, 2016), 41.
2. Gordon Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 78.
3. Lathrop, *Pastor*, 79.
4. Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006),127.

what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). To ask the question of *praxis* with the power of the gospel at work upon us, is to turn from the individualist staging of western culture, and to come into relationship with the poor whom God knows, calls, and remembers.

Praxis within Westhelle's *The Scandalous God*

The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross, was Westhelle's first major work published in English. An important excerpt from its preface offers both a summary of the entire work and indicates how Westhelle positions *praxis* in relation to the theology of the cross: "The theology of the cross is neither a discourse nor a doctrine. It is a way of life that we live out. It is a practice that involves a risk. It is a story that, if truly told, courts danger but moves also into hopeful solidarity, the solidarity of those who are moved by the pain of God in the midst of this world, or by the pain of the world in the midst of God."[5] Interpreters have taken up how Westhelle's identification of the theology of the cross as a practice intersects with Luther's understanding of coming under trial.[6] My purpose now is to explicate further the Latin American liberation theological tradition of *praxis*.

Scandalous God has ten chapters in two parts, the first four of which are historical and trace "the development of the cross motif throughout the history of the church." The last six are "thematic studies" each of which pair "cross" and another theological theme (e.g., cross and creation). With this two-part division in mind, the fourth chapter titled "Uses and Abuses: Modern Critiques and Responses" has particular significance. This is where Westhelle ends the historical studies and begins his constructive thematic work. Here, *praxis* relates in responding to modern critiques of the theology of the cross. Modern critiques have accused Christianity of encouraging a kind of passive acceptance or even glorification of suffering. The last of the subsections of chapter four titled, "Marx and the response of *praxis*" indicates where Westhelle lands, as the faithful theological *use* of the cross has emerged out from under the attacks of these modern critics. The use of the cross is a "practice that involves a risk."

Westhelle paraphrases one of Marx's most famous axioms to make this point about risk: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[7] In contrast to any teaching that would claim history was closed, and that change was not possible, Westhelle turns to Marx's claim instead that "history was just beginning. This beginning happens when people realize that the world is not to be merely interpreted but transformed."[8] In modern theology that

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emerges in response to Marx, the *abuse* of the cross would be the composition of interpretations that allow theologians, pastors and bishops to explain why people must endure their suffering, or to silence how they would speak out from their pain. Rather, the "Marxian-inspired responses took the cross to be a description of the conditions of the oppressed people of the world that had to be named in order for a practice of liberation to follow."[9] Although here in this quotation Westhelle does not cite any specific "Marxian-inspired" teacher, the specific vocabulary he uses, "the conditions of the oppressed people… that had to be named … for a practice of liberation to follow," points in the direction of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.[10]

Praxis and Freire: re-membering the poor as active members of a social body

Paulo Freire articulated his understanding of *praxis* in the context of adult education among agrarian workers in Brazil and Chile in the 1960s and '70s. Freire has become best known for his critique of what he articulated as "the banking concept" of education; that is, where teaching "becomes an act of depositing in which students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor." Education is a communicative practice, and Freire describes how a banking approach narrows the scope of possibilities for those placed on the receiving end from speaking in their own voices instead of the deposits: "the capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors."[11]

By contrast, Freire presents education as *praxis*: the intersubjective and dialogical practice of reflecting upon action

5. Westhelle, *Scandalous God*, x.
6. Arata Miyamoto, "Live and Speak about the Cross: Intercontextual Challenge for Global Christianity" in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 38:1 (2011), 23-27.
7. Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, (New York: Norton, 1978), 145.
8. Westhelle, *Scandalous God*, 73.
9. Westhelle, *Scandalous God*, 75.
10. Westhelle, *Scandalous God*, 129. "Latin American liberation theology, inspired by thinkers like Paulo Freire, stressed the productive dimension of praxis."
11. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Myra Bergman Ramos, tr. 1973. Reprint: (New York: Continuum, 2010), 72-73.

where one experiences oneself as an agent both individually and collectively with others in confronting challenges and circumstances. "Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."[12]

A few crucial contextualizing factors for Freire: the adult learners with whom he worked were mostly illiterate agricultural and domestic laborers. In Brazil of the 1960s literacy was legally required for voting. Landowning bosses dominated the sense of reality of illiterate peasants whose world was circumscribed to the land and severe working conditions. Deference and fear of authority were strategies for survival passed down between generations.[13] *Praxis* for Freire meant a breakthrough for his students, as reflection, action, and dialogue worked together, changing their world.

Naming is a critical component of Friere's dialogical exercise of *praxis*: "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly is to *name* the world, to change it. … But while to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone."[14] Thus, the use of *praxis* for Freire is a dialogical and shared naming. *Praxis* was the emergence of the oppressed into their own ability to name their world, not the imposition of "monologues" or "slogans" upon them.

To put it explicitly with reference to Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach": it was not the role of the theoretician of revolution to interpret, or to dictate, for the poor the vision of social change they must use. Rather, for Freire it was the role of the teacher and activist to prepare the conditions for the poor to re-member themselves, and to dialogue together about their use of power to change the world.[15]

Praxis and Assmann: the biblical and efficacious word

One of Westhelle's own teachers and mentors, Hugo Assmann of Brazil, took the word *praxis* into his vocabulary to indicate the ways Christians could reflect upon their actions and discover themselves as agents with a power to bring about changes together. Assmann felt that Marx was too abstract, that his critique "loses sight of or disdains the concrete historical situation in which a religious phenomenon emerges in its particularity."[16] Whereas social scientists, activists, and educators such as Freire could provide critical reflection on the conflicts of a given historical experience, Assmann claimed that a Christian critical reflection "becomes theological to the degree that it looks for the presence of the Christian faith in historical experience."[17] To objections coming from the other side that to read the Bible with specific conflicts in view amounted to a "sociologization of theology," Assmann responded that a kind of "'theological purism' cannot stand up to contact with the Bible."[18] In other words, a truthful reading of the Bible meant an encounter with a text that portrayed the lives of human beings with callings from and with God who faced the historical conflicts of their times: "God is *pro*-vocative—he [sic] calls us forwards, and is only to be found as one who goes forward with his people in a constant process of uprooting."[19]

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When Christians together discern a risky and "pro-vocative" calling from God in a specific situation, they make the shift from maintaining their usual practices to genuine *praxis*. Westhelle similarly described the effect of reading the Bible among the oppressed, in ways that synthesize together the approach of Freire and Assmann: "The experience of rereading the Bible in Latin America has its importance not so much in exegetical articulation as in the empowerment of people to name their world with unusual meanings … To call a big landowner Pharaoh can be a systematic absurdity, but it is a powerful metaphor for locating the meaning of the oppression that exists in rural areas."[20]

The example of reading the Exodus story together in the setting of agrarian peasants in conflict with landowners introduces the sense of naming the world so that a biblical plotline becomes a kind of horizon of historical expectation. The Exodus, as a story of both divine and human action, became a biblical model for Latin American liberationists conceiving history as a process. Egypt became the naming of then-reigning economic and political conditions under which the majority of people were oppressed, and liberation as the expected outcome stood for a

12. Freire, *Pedagogy*, 51.
13. Andrew Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
14. Freire, *Pedagogy*, 88.
15. Freire, *Pedagogy*, 89-91.
16. Vitor Westhelle, "Presuppositions and Implications of the Concept of Praxis in Hugo Assmann," in *Liberating Luther: A Lutheran Theology from Latin America*. Robert Butterfield, tr. (Minneapolis, Fortress: 2021), 148-149.
17. Hugo Assmann, *Teologia desde la praxis de la* liberacion, 1973. Reprint: *Theology for a Nomad Church*, tr. Paul Burns, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), 62.
18. Assmann, *Nomad Church*, 63.
19. Assmann, *Nomad Church*, 35.
20. Vitor Westhelle. "Una Sancta: The Unity of the Church amid Social Division," in *Liberating Luther*, 126.

new form of democratic socialism on the horizon.[21] The *praxis* of the people expecting liberation, then, was finding the right tools to effectively bring about the expected historical achievement: "praxis is defined first of all as human work with its teleological aspect (the concept that the craftsman has in mind before doing his [sic] work)."[22] History is something that agents make, or a drama where the characters already foresee the closing scene and follow the expectations of a script for how to arrive there. The acute theological question for Assmann then is what exactly is the interplay between the mystery of divine action and calculating human plans? Assmann asserted that Christians who attempt to discern their *praxis* in a given historical situation must ask questions about what actions are effective in a tactical sense. With openness to God's action however, "this effectiveness cannot be quantified in 'productive terms,'" but qualified by the gratuitousness of divine love.[23] Between the efficacious words of organizing and planning, and the biblical words that open up to divine mystery, people of faith critically reflect upon and communicate together in *praxis*.

Praxis and Westhelle: the political and eucharistic act of remembering

Westhelle wrote *The Scandalous God* in 2006, having lived through the collapse of hoped-for socialist revolutions and defeat of reformist democratic movements in Brazil.[24] I turn now to Argentinian theologian Nancy Bedford's summary at the turn of this century when globalization seemed triumphant: "Thirty years later, structural injustice in Latin America not only continues but is even more pronounced. The need for liberation in its widest sense continues to be acute. However, the exhilarating sense of impending revolutionary change is long since gone… the actual praxis capable of bringing about substantive change is rather difficult to determine, with no real consensus"[25] Taking this perspective into account, I want to pick up again with Westhelle's *Scandalous God* and the subsection of part four "Marx and the Response of Praxis." Westhelle here offers a paraphrase of Marx of "Theses on Feuerbach" but with a surprising twist: "For Marx there was a Promethean alternative: insurrection! History was not closed. What can be imagined might be done." Why does Westhelle use the term "insurrection" here, instead of the more expected Marxist vocabulary of revolution? Instead of a straightforward political direction for understanding *praxis*, Westhelle turns theological: "The resurrection of Jesus was an insurrection. … Here, theology responds to Marx by radicalizing his claim. History is not only open to the future but also the past."[26]

The praxis of resurrection means an openness to possibility, where situations that appear to us as dead and closed, and people whose gifts and abilities seem at first unpromising, may become, in ways we cannot anticipate or foresee, open to a future that God provides.

The theological movement that Westhelle draws from here includes the twentieth century political theology of Johann Baptist Metz who described a politics in anticipation of resurrection. What is the *praxis* of resurrection, that anticipates a radical resurrection?

First, it means a change in direction away from a horizon of possible action that is bound to calculating what will bring about victory or guarantee defeat. Instead of a technological mode that looks for which tools will bring success, *praxis* means trusting one's life and works for the sake of the poor to the *re-membering* God. God is the one who holds the staging of *praxis*, not the human audience that celebrates victory. Second, *praxis* means loyalty in remembering the ones whom the victors of history and the affluent of society have forgotten. Third, the praxis of resurrection means an openness to possibility, where situations that appear to us as dead and closed, and people whose gifts and abilities seem at first unpromising, may become, in ways we cannot anticipate or foresee, open to a future that God provides.

Westhelle writes, "[the] Cross in suffering that lies in the past can be recalled, and because it can be recalled it has a future, for we are reminded of this by the message of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the key by which past victims, through memory, are given a future that remains open. The past is not closed and it can be undone insofar as it can be remembered."[27] The resurrection key here is for the sake of opening the door of ongoing *praxis*, for the sake of *remembering* the poor despite a lack of recognition for those efforts, and in the teeth of past defeats.

Westhelle was circumspect about examples of his own *praxis*, but one example in his writings illustrates the theological sense of God's remembering of the poor amid ongoing struggles. In brief: during the Brazilian military dictatorship, landowning families consolidated their power and wealth through rapidly industrializing their agriculture production and evicted large numbers of peasants who had previously worked the land. Westhelle had served as a pastoral adviser with an ecumenical

21. Assmann, *Nomad Church*, 35, 39.
22. Westhelle, "Presuppositions" in *Liberating Luther*, 154.
23. Assmann, *Nomad Church*, 78-79, also 85.
24. Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*. Chapter 2, "The Revolution that Wasn't and the Revolution that Was 1961-1964," 28-60. I cite this example of the unintended outcomes of the political movements that arose from Freire's education campaigns.
25. Nancy E. Bedford, "Little Moves Against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment" in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 160-161.
26. Westhelle, *Scandalous God*, 73.
27. Westhelle, *Scandalous God*, 73.

organization to an encampment of landless peasants who had organized themselves as a community in witness to the injustice they had suffered. For this encampment, Westhelle performed a dramatic portrayal of Revelation 13, and then divided the community into smaller groups whose task was to interpret and name the figures of the beast in the biblical text. While groups of men named the beast as "the military, the government, the capitalist system, the rural-based oligarchy," one group consisting only of women said something else: "pans, (a symbol of arduous work, normally done by women, of cooking over a small open fire under a hot black plastic tent filled with smoke); alcohol (which mostly men indulged in at night); and the central committee of the camp … which was comprised of males only." While the men used the drama provided to name the targets of the large-scale and heroic struggle against capitalism, the women named what the men had forgotten. The naming of the women turned the attention of the staging of their action to what was suppressed and seemingly poor within their own company, the work of cooking amid the smoke under the hot plastic tents. The eucharist that the community celebrates after the sense of recognition and repentance, Westhelle describes as "a celebration in which things left behind, rendered to oblivion, were rescued from selective forgetting."

Here we have the risky naming that leads to action and change that Freire describes. We have the sense of *praxis* that is strictly theological that Metz articulates, that of a community in its ongoing repentance and remembering of suffering, experiencing Christ's power in their midst in spite of their apparent defeats.[28] We have the eucharistic re-membering of the congregation in the body of Christ, the one who became poor for their sake (2 Cor 8:9). We have the mystery and the richness, the gratuity that Assmann spoke of, here as love and forgiveness set amid conflict and struggle for the sake of the poor.

Remembering with the poor: the future of our past

I carry the study of Westhelle and the others with me into my current ministry in a student-learning capacity at a congregation in a near west suburb of Chicago. Bedford's essay, "Little Moves Against Destructiveness" and her commentary on Gal 2:10 both cited previously above, have provided me with examples for taking *praxis* as a matter of communicative discernment within Scripture in a congregational setting. At first glance, our members are fewer and their bodies are older than our capacious building with its stairs was intended to house for worship. My congregation is typical of many in the ELCA, where the feeling can set in that our future appears poor and empty when measured against our past membership. Just blocks from this comfortable suburb is the nearest Chicago neighborhood where the majority of residents, though employed, attain incomes that leave their families below the poverty line. In our case, the effects of racism in housing policy and in personal decisions in matters of housing have contributed to the wealth gap. Yet, there is no White-majority congregation in North American like mine that is far away from histories of violence toward people of color and histories of accumulation of wealth among some and the impoverishment of others.[29]

The risky way forward will not be through rhetorical fights against abstract concepts or through slogans. What I want to offer as *praxis* for congregations like my own is that "little moves" open up pathways for more challenging and risky encounters.

Given the limitations of what we as a congregation have to work with, and the conflicts and contradictions of our setting, the apostolic words *remember the poor* reverberate for me through our spaces for what *praxis* seems faithful to our situation: in the sense of remembering our neighbors and the condition of their poverty, in naming the truth of our own place within generational racism, and in and re-membering our own sense of future, purpose and calling with and from God. The risky way forward will not be through rhetorical fights against abstract concepts or through slogans. What I want to offer as *praxis* for congregations like my own is that "little moves" open up pathways for more challenging and risky encounters. My congregation council, after discernment and dialogue with the co-director of a nearby non-profit, has begun to support a cooking class for parents and children in the Austin neighborhood. At this moment our "little moves" amount to gathering up groceries, but already I hear a new openness in my congregation members to begin to talk about our two neighborhoods. I hear the words "racism" and "privilege" named already among my members. This has begun to emerge from previous gaps of silence without me needing to lecture or confront them. It is my hope that the relationship with the non-profit will deepen our understanding of discipleship and the direction of our praxis. In the power of the gospel, the staging of how we tell our stories and what future they hold will change. It is the *Spirit*'s work, in the cruciformity of praxis that we seek, in faith that trusts and in trusting moves, but does not yet grasp or perceive.

28. Vítor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant* (Minneapolis, Fortress: 2010), 165-167.

29. Keeanga-Tamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016). Touré F. Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism*, (New York: Verso, 2020). I offer these as two examples that have helped me think about praxis taking as liberation theologians do, both economics and politics together, and as a matter of both anti-racism and forging cross-racial alliances in the North American context.