

Too Brittle to Break: Theological Imaginings on the Body of Christ

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I confess that the words, language, and metaphors I am accustomed to hearing and speaking in the Christian faith have always felt disconnected from the contemporary vernacular—that is, how we speak of faith in the church on Sunday feels so removed from the realities we live in the rest of the week. Though my seminary education has given me an appreciation for the theological intricacies in words like “sacraments,” “apostolic,” and “the body of Christ,” often they bear an air of insider language that either compromises their meaning for most people, or readily sacrifices the mysteries of faith for a profitable objectivity. As such, I believe formal ecclesial language often represents the church’s self-preoccupation and the widening disconnect between the church and the challenging and changing realities of the world.

For me, the traditional ecclesial dialect not only carries a great deal of baggage, but it is also amplified the pains and difficulties of a faith journey riddled with doubt and questions. Even though I am a born and raised Lutheran, for most of my life I have yearned for words of faith that speak candidly to the realities that everyday Christians face today. This is not to say that what our faith’s forebearers had to say is no longer relevant, but rather how we speak of these things in and for the church today should be given due consideration. I truly believe the ecclesial language of the emerging church will be comprised of traditional ways of speaking as well as innovative words that renew the church’s witness to God’s movement in the world today.

One of those innovative yet ancient linguistic forms I believe to be essential to the emerging language of faith is poetry. A few years prior to my enrollment in seminary, a Lutheran pastor introduced me to the writings of John O’Donohue, Mary Oliver, Jan Richardson, and Wendell Berry. For the first time in my life, I felt I had found refuge and solace in words of faith that were attentive to the mysterious and wonderful ways the gospel transforms both hearts and minds. The simplicity and imagination of these writers has inspired me to harness my own words to speak of the Christian faith. Such a creative venture has been challenging in

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that such intimate self-reflection has brought me into places of deep grief and pain. However, in doing so I am beginning to find a great deal of healing and am discovering a fuller joy in being a baptized member of God’s church.

The following collection of poems are intended to be read as blessings upon individuals and congregations during times of significant transition or change in the life of the church.¹ In doing so, I pray that through these words the Holy Spirit would provide healing to those who have been hurt by the church and renew trust in God’s presence in the broken and beautiful body of Christ.

1. These poems were written as a summative assignment for “Being Body of Christ,” a second-year course at Wartburg Theological Seminary. Each of the poems articulates my reflections on the various themes of the course and some of my core theological commitments.

Ephesians 4:11-13 (NRSV)

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

More than: a blessing for the body of Christ

Theme: the community and collective person of Christ

Without this blessing
we cannot hope
to taste and see
the fullness
of being together;
to receive
more than
what we can imagine.

From hidden times
and remote places
we are gathered
by the One
who moves in,
and is moved by,
by the least,
for the sacred work
of community.

This blessing,
in its fullness
is not for you alone,
for it exists
in the tender
moments
when joy and sorrow
witness one another
unafraid and undivided.
Called to dwell
in the assembly
of the living
and the dead,
bound to
the holy rhythms
of confession,
we become more than
what we were,

what we are,
what we could be.

In the presence
of the first breath
that never ceased;
that refuses to conform;
that comes broken for us;
we sense
and we witness
what it means
to be beloved.

Raised and renewed,
these blessings
belong
to one another.

Galatians 2:19b-20 (NRSV)

*I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live,
but it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh I live
by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.*

No easy thing: the blessed word *shalom*

Theme: two strategies/ecclesiology

Take but a moment,
be still,
listen and receive
the words
proclaimed:
“for you”

For you
God will undertake
a wholly new
endeavor.
For you
have been
equipped
with ears
to hear the law,
with eyes
to see the call,

with words
to speak the truth,
with hearts
to act in love.

This is no easy thing.

Tempted and torn
by allegiances,
by obligations,
by the false release
of apathy,
you may find
yourself far
from the path
that was set before you.

Yet this
endeavor
leads not
into far off places,
but to where
you've been
and wherever you are.

You will scarcely
understand it yourself
as you speak
shalom
for those
who have
forgotten
its sound.

Take heart,
for this word
is yours too,
even when you forget,
even when you fail,
even when you cannot bear it
to the most
for the least.

This is no easy thing.
Take heart.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 (NRSV)

*For just as the body is one and has many members,
and all the members of the body, though many,
are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit
we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks,
slaves or free—and we were all made
to drink of one Spirit.*

Testimony: blessings of the font

Theme: the universal priesthood

The gift
of this water
is that all
that is so ordinary,
is now so precious;
so extraordinary.

The gift
of this water
assures
that all are free
from all the toils
and tolls
we construe
to merit
what we cannot.

The gift
of this water
emerges from
the depths
of creation,
radically forming
what we
cannot fathom:
forgiveness.

The gift
of this water
bridges the gap
between sanctuaries
and streets,
bridges the gap
between strangers
and neighbors
bridges the gap
between us,

and within us.
The gift
of this water
is the holy vigil
it keeps
over the suffering,
with the suffering,
by the suffering,
through the suffering One.

The gift
of this water
is the authentic
and insistent
affirmation
that your life
matters;
that within your life
there are testimonies
too holy
not to share
for the sake of the world.

1 Corinthians 4:1-2 (NRSV)

*Think of us in this way,
as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.
Moreover, it is required of stewards
that they be found trustworthy.*

To be known: the blessing of relationships

Theme: the sacrament of neighbors

I cannot say
how you will fare
for the task
before you
requires
words of grace
forgotten,
or perhaps
yet unspoken.

Yet what I
can say
is this:
Do you remember
how it felt
to be seen;
to be known?

Being witnessed
in their stories
will change them.

Being a witness
to their stories
will change you.

Let it.

As the walls
come down
you will learn
what it means
to live with
a broken heart;
what it means
to bear the hope
others cannot see,
nor dare not see.

Stay the course,
for the common good
begins with
the stories
of people blessed
by the ministry
of presence.

Trust that
simply abiding
in the sacred presence
of another's story
is the first step
towards something
that will change
the world.

Isaiah 55:12 (NRSV)

*You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

Too brittle to break: a blessing for worshippers

Theme: worship; the kingdom of God

This is a gathering
of pilgrims,
a time of
visions,
a space for
rituals
too strange
and wonderful
to receive
alone.

I won't lie:
this gathering
will not,
and cannot
be sustained
by any merit;
by any grace
you can offer.
But therein
lies its mercy.

In this
assembly
the holiest
of grandeurs
just happens
to everything
for the sake
of everything.

I know
this probably doesn't
make any sense.
It's just a song;
It's just bread and wine;
It's just water;
It's just a book;
It's just my neighbor.
Yet these things
sit at the edge
of a moment
too brittle to break;
too big to make
for ourselves.

I cannot say
how long
it will last,
but you can trust
it will take
all the time it needs
to give you
everything you need.

For a holy
imagination
has been at work
filling us
since before
the world was;
leading us
beyond the doors,
beyond the walls,
to something
so beautiful,
so familiar,
so new.

Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

*Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Mind the ways: the blessing of becoming

Theme: prayer and education

There are
patterns
and seasons
committed
to the process
of becoming.

Do not rush
forward
in your longing,
expecting
only to find
mile markers
and burning bushes.

While there might be
some of those,
there will be
far more
unmarked paths.

Take heart.
There is much to learn
on the way,
and those who've gone
before you
walk this road
with you still.

Remember,
this all began
not with books
or doctrines,
not with cathedrals
nor bishops,
but with bread
and wine
in hearth and home.

Take a moment,
and still yourself
for the journey.

Mind the ways
your heart aches
when speaking
of sorrows
not your own;

Mind the ways
stories begin
to heal
in the telling;

And mind the ways
speaking
their names aloud
opens us daily
to a wisdom
we cannot
have alone.

Matthew 6:21 (NRSV)

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sun and rain: the blessing in abundance

Theme: stewardship and community

The signs
are there
for us,
though
they are not
convenient
or admirable
by those
with the most.

For it is easier
to claim
merits
as the meaning
of prosperity
than to
receive

what we have
for what it is:
abundance
void of
any meaning.

Yes, it is harder
to live
together
in the purview
of need;
in the scope
of suffering.
But therein
lies a life
lived in
the company
of saints.

For the gospel
comes alive
in the people
and places
of told
and untold
sufferings,
when wealth
is traded
for wholeness.

In the
presence
of the holy,
the fists closed
around idols and anger,
pride and shame,
open
to the margins
that have echoed
through the ages.

By the reign of the Son
we shall finally live
together
under sun and rain.

Psalm 35:28 (NRSV)

*Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness
and of your praise all day long.*

With the Word: the blessing of your witness

Theme: evangelism

This blessing
can only be
conveyed,
with words
and heart;
entrusted
into the
movement
of imaginations.

There are no
right words
for what you
must do;
no proper
ways to speak;
no formalities
to observe.

It is unadorned.
It is authentic.
It is death.
It is sorrow.
It is joy.
It is whole.
It is destitute.
It is truth.
It is life.
It is you.

The only thing
it can't be
is forced.

So, let them know
of the simple
wonders
that have graced
your life.

So, let them hear
the harmonious
song
that has already graced
your death.

And let them see
through your eyes
the things
God has done;
the things
God is doing;
the things
God will do;
the things
God can do;
with the Word.

1 Corinthians 11:26 (NRSV)

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

One table: a blessing for when we forget

Themes: ecumenism, the Lord's supper

In our brokenness
through
the ages,
you and I have
forgotten
that at one time,
maybe even
the first time
we came together,
it was at
one table.

Distressed
by the discord
of our own making.
we've forgotten
how wide the table is.

We've forgotten
the table can always be
wider still.

We've forgotten
we can't come
to this table on our own.

We've forgotten this table
doesn't belong to us.

We forgotten we belong
at this table
together.

It won't be easy,
trying to remember
these things,
but what a joy
it will be
when, at last,
we find
at this table
brothers and sisters
we never knew
we had.

Please know
that this table
expects nothing
of us,
but invites us
into the sacred work
of affirming
how all the traditions,
how all the people,
how all the reasons
ultimately
brought us here.

Κύριε, ἐλέησον

*For the peace of the whole world,
for the well-being of the church of God,
and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord.*

Wind and flames: the blessing of wonder

Theme: global connections

“You are here.”
Wherever here is
it means
you are
in a place
that means
something
to you.

You were not
always here,
nor will you be.

For the
road before you
is ancient
in the art
of thrusting
upon you
a horizon
that shall not
be belied.

As you go,
you will find yourself
in places so foreign
so distant.
You will not understand,
and that’s okay.

When you
do not know
the map,
you cannot claim
the map
as your own.

There will be signs,
along the way
that will guide you;
that will teach you
that will humble you
to the songs
that draw us
together anew.

Here, on the
other side of the map
between certainty,
and relativism,
may you discover
a fuller joy
in being human
as wind and flames
disturb you
into wonder.

Isaiah 43:1

*But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

As a prophet: a blessing for connections

Theme: social ministry; care for creation

This blessing
is only found
in the pain
of prophecy;
in the visions
and dreams
that bespeak
of what might be
to those who
are made beloved.

As a prophet
you can learn
how to trust
in the justice
that knows
and affirms

the intimate
and difficult ways
of grief and loss.

As a prophet
you can speak
over and over
of the ways
of peacemaking
that will come
surely and still
in the storms
of fear and doubt.

As a prophet
you can stand
in wonder
of the wilderness;
for the skies, soils, and seas,
immersed
in the rhythms
of refuge and retreat,
are in need
of refuge
from false prophets.

As a prophet
you will be led
to the ones
deprived of life
to call them
by their name;
to heal them
in God's name;
to love them
in Christ's name.