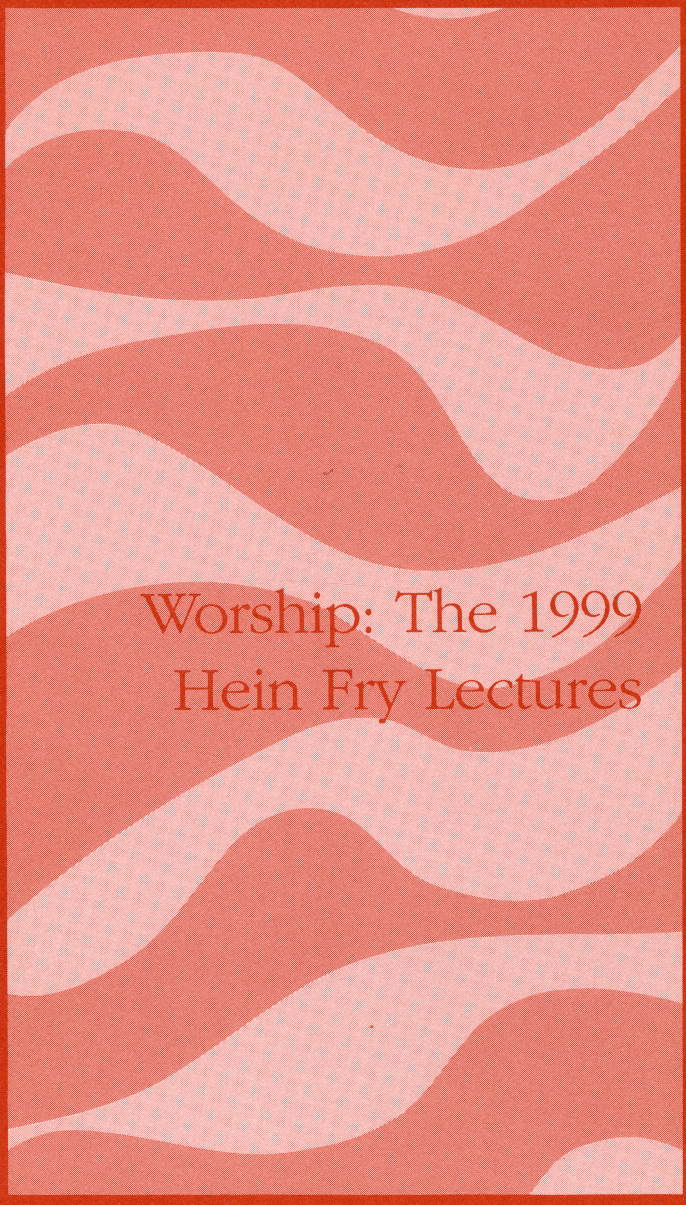
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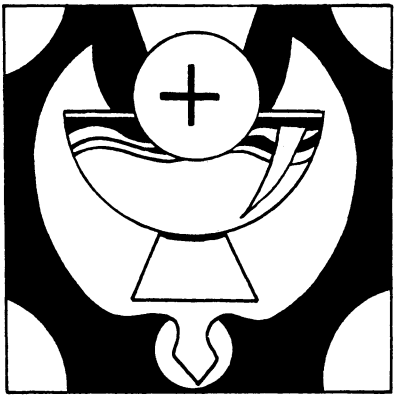
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Worship: The 1999 Hein Fry Lectures

"Worship" n.: Act of paying divine honors to a deity; religious reverence and homage.
"Worship" v.t.: To pay divine honors to; to adore; venerate.
"Worship" v.i.: To perform acts of homage or adoration; esp., to perform religious service.

Whether at St. Peter's in Rome or at St. John's by the gas station, worship is the center of Christian identity and of the religious life. Here faith and theology come to expression; here cultures clash and artistic culture is nourished; here we act out self-consciously and often unconsciously who we are *coram Deo* (before God). Here we unite and here we divide.

Worship was the subject of the Hein Fry Lectures in 1999. These lectures are delivered annually at all eight ELCA seminaries and annually published in *Currents in Theology and Mission.*

Mary Collins, OSB, observes that liturgy aims to bring us close, but not too close, to God; liturgy intends to buffer our knowledge of God. One of the chief characteristics of "modern" culture has been its confidence in rational analysis of human knowledge as the sure way to truth. Today human reason is also called into question and we speak about *my* God, the God in my subjective image. Can we keep celebrating a liturgy that affirms the real presence of God in a culture that encourages doubt about the value of everything but consumption? The author calls attention to Annie Dillard, who believes that liturgy conceals as well as reveals divine mystery. People in the pews do not deny terror; they need it tamed. While we want some extraterrestrial presence to eliminate our burdens, God's concession to our self-conscious nature is to be present to us, but by way of intentional absences. Christians need the formative discipline of a gathered community of believers, retelling and appropriating pieces of the story of Jesus, in order to de-center and re-center our lives.

In a second essay **Mary Collins** asserts that the basic issue at stake in the celebration of the liturgy is nothing less than the construction and maintenance of shared ecclesial identity. Christian religious identity comes into public view when the church publicly celebrates the relationships that it believes constitute the world's salvation. If Lutherans excel in preaching, Roman Catholics make

a case for serious ritual play in the liturgical assembly, for ritual proclamation of the word. Torches and incense once preceded the emperor who was adorned with garnet, ruby, and gold; now the liturgical assembly uses similar gestures as it playfully celebrates and thoughtfully explores the implications of the church's relationship to the Word. Critical academic techniques for biblical study cannot substitute for the mystagogical reading of the biblical Word within the worshiping assembly. Christian mystagogy seeks to discern the mystery of the divine presence in the post-Resurrection experience of divine absence. In an era of fragmentation, we need to use all the traditional means available to intensify the gospel's claim on our communities and ourselves.

The third essay by **Mary Collins** notes that the late modern quest for spirituality is often a quest of individuals disconnected from traditional communities and institutions. Liturgical spirituality, on the other hand, is intrinsically communal in its form and ethical in its intent. What the church embodies in its liturgical assemblies is the interiority of the church, not an affirmation of the cultural self. Israel learned that freedom from bondage to Pharaoh is achieved through a binding with the God of Sinai. Since corporate liturgical practice is the human foundation for understanding the demand of faith, individual communion cups diminish any dangerous social insight communion might press upon the communing body. Does our century predispose late modern people toward a retrieval of Christian liturgical spirituality? The constant in liturgical spirituality is not a well-preserved past but the living relationship of salvation revealed in Christ.

Gordon W. Lathrop proposes that the catholic church is always an assembly. It is always a local meeting gathered before and enlivened by the one God. Our common life today is marked by a lessening and a deterioration of those public and communal institutions where we mix with a wide company of people. The central matters of the assembly—stories to live by, an important communal meal, the establishment of our identity in baptism—are stunningly relevant to daily North American life. Assembly can receive our longing for community, but criticize it and invite it to transformation. We need to help the assembly stay strongly centered on the book and the meal and the sending to the hungry, not on our own menu of tastes in music or style. Welcome everyone to the dignity of being a participant in the assembly of God.

In his second essay, **Gordon W. Lathrop** observes that early Christians left us two kinds of gospels: discourse gospels and biographical gospels. The very dynamics of the *ordo* (the flow or outline of what Christians do when they gather together) are available to us in the canonical, biographical gospels. "Sending" has largely disappeared from our *ordo*, both as in sending portions to

the hungry and signs of justice to the poor and in sending the eschatological good news to the world. We should not deceive ourselves that we are celebrating the *ordo* when the real center of our meeting together has been made to be our own self-expression. Local customs, local ethnicity, local music, and local leadership are never enough in themselves to communicate the gospel's purpose.

Preaching, **Gordon W. Lathrop** argues in his third essay, is liturgical, exegetical, and prophetic. Christian preaching is always intended to unfold and open the Scriptures that have been read and to feed faith. Preaching in the assembly expresses the church's identity in the mercy of God and the church's open boundaries in the midst of the world. Preaching is a biblical event. The purpose of the texts on which we preach is to encounter the biblical God, who has come to our time with judgment and promise. Preaching is an eschatological event linking the presence of God to the creation of faith. Preaching is the speaking of the living word of God into the present of the hearers.

Two centuries ago the Scottish poet Robert Burns was inspired by a louse on a lady's bonnet at church to write:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion;
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea' e us,
An' ev' n devotion!

Sister Mary Collins and brother Gordon Lathrop have helped us see ourselves as others see us—saints of other times and other denominations and other theological persuasions—but they have also assisted us to see ourselves as the Other sees us and as God's story shapes us. Perhaps they have identified certain "airs of devotion" that could well leave us (liturgy is at once cross-cultural and critical of culture), and they have surely called us back to community and assembly as the hallmarks of authentic Christian worship.

Worship is a transitive verb, an intransitive verb, and a noun. And, as the Hein Fry lectures remind us, much more.

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

Doxology, Yes: But Who is Our God?

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Starting points

An inquiry into the meeting of liturgy and culture is open to development in any number of directions. Each unit of the pair—liturgy/culture—invites almost endless inquiry. The "and" that links them only expands the possible permutations of the theme. Which liturgy? Whose culture? Having to establish a focus, I determined that late modern culture in the U.S. would be the cultural milieu with which we will engage. Liturgy as a contemporary ecclesial event in late modern culture will be the experience of liturgy under scrutiny.

By speaking of liturgy as "contemporary ecclesial event," I take the position that Christian churches in late modernity have reason to consider each other primarily as kin. Whatever our differences, great and small, our liturgies are in continuity with the great liturgical traditions of the Christian churches. Our divisive past—our once nonnegotiable Lutheran and Catholic convictions—will be less central to these reflections than the challenges posed by our contemporary culture for Christian identity and our understanding of Christian mission. There are common conditions we share as Lutheran and Catholic Christians. First, we are Western Christians implicated at the turn of the twenty-first century in the flawed late modern culture in the United States. Second, it is in this culture, being disseminated globally, that we have to be the church; for we have no choice but to be in our own times. And third, we are members of ecclesial communions for whom baptismal and eucharistic faith and practice are constitutive of our ecclesial identities. These commonly shared grounds are more than enough to get us started thinking about liturgy and culture.

By titling this first presentation "Doxology, Yes: But Who is Our God?"—a question—I am acknowledging that the starting point in any discussion of contemporary liturgy is problematic. Doxology, yes. Liturgical worship events continue to happen with regularity in our churches. I will not go into any discussion here about who is coming and who is missing from regular Sunday assemblies, although these are questions of significance. I start with a simpler given. Seminary trustees and faculties, candidates for ordination and lay ministers as well as baptized laity agree that public worship is part of the church's mission and continue to engage in it. Doxology, yes.

But who is our God? Dissatisfaction with public worship is high, even with those who lead it. Unease is expressed through

attempts to retrieve older forms of worship, to construct new alternatives to available forms of liturgy, to participate only infrequently, or to merely endure Sunday morning. We sometimes assume that widespread dissatisfaction might be overcome if only all the concerned parties would work harder to give shape and content to the liturgical event and the preaching that is part of it. Yet we also know that the church's liturgy, whether polished or awkward, has a purpose that can stir unease in every human community. The church's liturgies celebrate the relationships we believe to be redemptive. So who is our God, and what kind of praise is correct, fitting praise for this God? Doxology, yes; but who is our God?

Arriving at knowledge of God

Over my desk—the foreground for my work—hangs a small wooden plaque I picked up at a cathedral shop in a provincial Mexican city. Mounted on a mahogany rectangle is a three-dimensional form made from hammered metals—brass, bronze, and silver. The central figure is the burning bush in low relief. To the left, just below the bush, is a tiny pair of sandals, witness to human attraction to the mystery of God. "This place, too, is holy ground—be in awe" is the message above me—the background for my work. But the desk itself is a noisy and sometimes irreverent place. It holds journals and papers that document ongoing conversations among theologians about who God is, debates about what correct worship of God requires, explanations of how culture conceals the spiritual search of young adults, investigations of women's ways of worshiping, and reports about how Americans everywhere are shopping for faith as though it were a market commodity. Essays sitting on a nearby bookshelf speak without embarrassment of "my God," shrinking divine mystery to a household deity who complements the cat and the power child. A noisy desktop. An icon of divine mystery. Each questions me as I work: How do you know what you think you know about God?

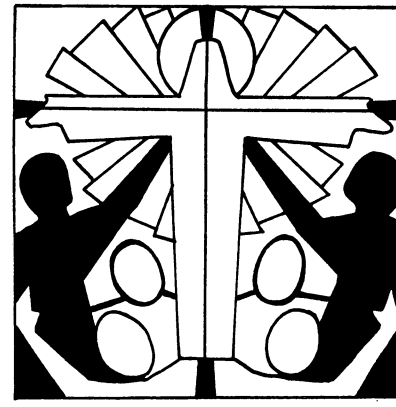
On buffering the knowledge of God. The British writer Monica Furlong once observed, "It has been customary to talk as if the purpose of the Church has been to put people in touch with God, or to keep them in touch with God." But Furlong, a biographer of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, is interested in the contemplative dimension of Christian existence, and so she sees the limiting side of church doctrines and practices. She continues: "...although on the face of it [the church] seems to exist to help its adherents into relationship with God, it equally, and perhaps essentially, plays the opposite role of *trying to filter out an experience of transcendence which might be overwhelming.*"[1] What did she judge to be one of the church's key filters for helping people avoid too great intimacy with God? Liturgy.

Reflecting on mid-century liturgical practice before the period of reform, the Anglican Furlong wrote: "A highly developed liturgy such as the Roman Mass can be seen as the tracing out in drama of a reality which the participants could not bear to experience too often, yet which they wish to be kept in touch with." How extraordinary this sounds on first hearing! Liturgy as "keeping in touch" without getting too close! Liturgy functioning like the Sunday night phone call to parents from the college dorm—or better yet the weekly e-mail

[1] Monica Furlong, *Contemplating Now* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1983), 36, emphasis added. The biography is *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

message—because virtual reality is preferable to direct contact with parents. Interestingly, Furlong's judgment about liturgy's indirect place in the realm of religious experience is reminiscent of the line from the expatriate American poet T. S. Eliot, who once wrote, sadly I think: "human kind cannot bear very much reality."[2] While the notion of liturgy as religious experience "lite" seems illogical and contrary to what many worshippers believe to be the case, Furlong's unflinching declaration of liturgy's intent deserves our attention. Liturgy aims *to bring us close, but not too close, to God; to keep us in touch with, but not overwhelmed by, mystery.* She is not promoting the now familiar judgment that the church needs better liturgical celebration. She is identifying the intrinsic paradox of liturgy itself: liturgy intends to buffer knowledge of God. She was implicitly challenging her churchgoing readers to consider their own knowledge of God and God's ways with us.

On knowing God—and not knowing—liturgically. My own formative knowledge of God was primarily liturgical, which for me also meant a biblical foundation through the old Roman lectionary. As a Chicago Catholic (a distinctive subspecies in the American church before the Second Vatican Council), I knew well the liturgical ambiance of gold, incense, and ermine, and postures of self-abasement that spoke of God's majesty. Because of my liturgically informed pastor and mother, I knew in Latin and in translation the church's liturgical texts and the religious world they constructed Sunday by Sunday, day by day, season by season. Had I also known at that early age what the leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century liturgical movement in the Roman Catholic Church were teaching about liturgy and culture, I would have found it believable. They argued that liturgy well-celebrated was the source of the true Christian spirit and that the true Christian spirit was the source of social regeneration.[3] These same adults who introduced me to the liturgy introduced me to the church's concern for the poor.



Yet having affirmed that the early leaders of the liturgical movement in the Roman Catholic Church were credible in their conviction about the importance of liturgy for learning the true Christian spirit necessary for social regeneration, let me now say with equal conviction that they were men of their times looking backward. Through no fault of their own, pivotal Catholic leaders—Benedictine monks like Prosper Gueranger and Lambert Beauduin and popes like Pius X and Pius XI—were advocating the "fit" between the hierarchically ordered world of

[2] T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 14.

[3] See Mary Collins, "Michel, Virgil," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought,"* ed. Judith Dwyer (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 609; also Michael Baxter, "Reintroducing Virgil Michel: Towards a Counter-Tradition of Catholic Social Ethics in the United States," *Communio* (Fall 1997), 499–528.

the Roman liturgy and the hierarchically ordered European monarchical society that they hoped to restore. Catholic liturgy's God in my childhood was a benign but stern monarch, a patriarch approachable through the Son and his mother Mary and the saints who had access to the throne of God.

Because that familiar Catholic religious world had been challenged by the popular revolutions of western Europe, churchmen whose identity and commitments had been shaped in the older regime were convinced that the emerging democratic society was an affront to God. In such a social order God's will could not be done on earth as in heaven. In retrospect we can see that the Roman Mass and the Eucharistic devotions that churchmen promoted as the source of the true Christian spirit were valued as a corrective to the unfriendly spirits of European modernity. The Benedictine monk Lambert Beauduin's perceptive assessment, made in Belgium in the first decade of this century, was that the Catholic liturgy's received form taught its lay attendees docility and dependence on the clergy as God's design and communicated a sense of divine majesty that prompted awe and the obeisance of the baptized.[4]

But, to borrow from the poet Yeats, "things fell apart." The Catholic Church's focused resistance to modernity did not hold. By mid-twentieth century, the Roman Catholic hierarchy determined to take another look at modernity, with its values of participation and reasoned discourse. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council—to their own surprise perhaps—opened the way to reform of the extravagantly monarchical practices of the official Roman liturgy that had shaped the Catholic religious imagination. They called for reformed liturgical practice. Yet they continued to reason as their predecessors had done. If liturgy is the source of the true Christian spirit, the liturgical process as well as the liturgy's verbal content mattered immensely.

While Roman Catholics were reimagining their grasp of divine mystery, revisioning God's plan for the world's salvation in a new cultural situation, so also Lutherans were taking up the work of liturgical reform, although from different historical starting points.

Catholic liturgical reformers in mid-century agreed that, whatever else needed to be done in a reformed Catholic liturgy "the full, conscious, and active participation of the laity" was to be considered "above all else."[5] Why? Motivation for the liturgical change lay in the church's changing self-understanding. A laity once valued for their passivity needed to be transformed into active promoters of the gospel, if the Roman Catholic Church was to be in critical dialogue with the modern world for the transformation of society at every level. This was a very rational—very modern—approach to liturgy. What was not adverted to by the mid-twentieth century liturgical reformers was whether churchgoers were prepared to take up the new collaborative relationship with the Triune God that the liturgical reforms were structuring, more or less reasonably.

Was God really doing new things with the church through our participatory com-

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[4] Mary Collins, "The Form of Liturgical Prayer, in *Teach Us To Pray*, ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova, PA.: Villanova University Press, 1995), 87-89. Also Lambert Beauduin, *La piete de l'Eglise* (Louvain: Mont Cesar, 1914) trans. V. Michel, *Liturgy, the Life of the Church* (Collegeville: MN: The Liturgical Press, 1926).

[5] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para. 14, The 1963 Constitution on the Divine Liturgy. English translation in *Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-79* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), 8.

mittee structures? Were there aspects of the divine mystery, long concealed, that would come to new liturgical disclosure? Or would deeper comprehension of the mystery of salvation only encourage deeper concealment of what most of the baptized could not really bear to know? Would we still recognize in the reformed liturgies of late modernity the God of Jesus Christ we believed we knew perfectly and intimately through our traditional liturgy?

On knowing anything in late modernity. There has been no culturally neutral setting for this liturgical reform process to occur, no contamination-free laboratory.[6] We in the United States are in our late modern culture and our late modern culture is in us, whether we welcome it or not. Even traditionalists cannot escape the reaches of modernity. Thus, some brief consideration of the culture of late modernity is necessary in order to establish the contemporary context for continued theological reflection on liturgical doxology.

Libraries are full of writings on aspects of the culture of modernity. Most recently, academic discussions have shifted to reflection on "late modernity" and the "postmodern." One aspect of the cultural shifts named in these terms can be noted here. The Enlightenment spirit at the heart of modernity had grounded reliable knowledge about anything at all in the workings of human reason. This had the immediate consequence of undermining traditional religious authority once securely vested in biblical revelation and church practice as interpreted by ordained churchmen. Put briefly, one of the chief characteristics of modern culture has been its confidence in reasoned critical analysis of all human knowledge and institutions as the sure way to truth.

It was only a matter of time before the critical reason of modernity came under the rigorous scrutiny of the thoroughly critical modern mind. Late modernity has moved toward its contrary—something still forming and without a name of its own, called the "postmodern sensibility." Late moderns have a predilection for "deconstructing" all cultural constructs, and the deconstruction has taken an ironic twist. Having once been infinitely confident in the power of human reason, the cultural mood has turned. Three centuries after human reason challenged the claims of revealed knowledge, reasonable thinkers are now challenging any and all reasoned claims to be able to know the truth of anything. What we know is partial, fragmented, relative to our limited viewpoint. Not surprisingly, cultural confidence in any sure knowledge of God—whether and who—has again been shaken. Hence, discourse about "my God."

Systematic theologians empathetic to late modern and postmodern sensibilities have not been deterred entirely from contemplating the mystery of God revealed in Christ even in this situation of non-knowing. (As Monica Furlong's observations remind us, the church has always had an apophatic tradition, a posture of not-knowing divine mystery.) Some theologians have found liberating the authorization to question things already-known by pointing out what has been overlooked even in the theological tradition. Feminist theologians, for example, have looked at the long-unexamined assumption that "male" is a proper

[6] The inevitable meeting of liturgy and culture can best be recognized comparatively. For Roman Catholic witnesses, see "The Zaire Rite for the Mass" and "Eucharistic Prayer for Australian Aboriginals" (1973) in *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration*, ed. M. Thurian and G. Wainwright (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 198 and 205. Also Thomas Kane, videographer, "The Dancing Church" (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995).

attribute of the divine. Post-holocaust theologians have argued that the suffering of God is more credible than the classical claims that God is impassible. Liberation theologians have exposed the class bias in theological discourse that identified divine authority with "the rulers of this world," e.g., incumbent monarchs, oligarchies, and dictators. Critical theorists of western culture and civilization are forcing us to reexamine metaphysical thinking about God as the Supreme Being, arguing logically that ontological thinking has nothing to do with God. Other late modern thinkers have challenged any and all "master narratives"—including the gospel—as no more than stories we tell ourselves to make meaning where there is none. Astrophysicists put their minds to demonstrating to us that we are motes in the expanding cosmos—conscious and self-aware motes to be sure, but motes nonetheless, a fortuitous achievement within cosmic chaos. So whatever our theological project, deconstructionist epistemologists assure us that all our judgments lack truth, since truth itself is a fiction. Suddenly, belief is all there is.

Surrounded by this cacophony of our human reason, making some of the noise ourselves, faithful Christians still gather to sing praise and remember Jesus from within this cosmic chaos. Even as we are shown from every angle how the social and cultural arrangements and the religious institutions we thought were reliable are fragile human constructs, believers resist, confident in their shared knowledge of God. Baptized Christians sing and read and preach and dunk and oil and eat and drink away uncertainty. Yet the bravest among us allow ourselves to wonder. Can we keep celebrating a liturgy that affirms the real presence of God with us and still live sanely in a culture that encourages doubt about the truth and value of everything but consumption? Dare we agree that liturgical practice itself, in whatever form, conceals truth about God that we are unable to bear? Does all liturgical doxology—traditional liturgy and contemporary liturgy alike—conspire in the concealment of truth? Is liturgy in the late modern world merely mystification presenting itself as divine epiphany? Or is liturgy the form of Christian faith most suited to postmodernity's fragmented experience of human existence? The questions press us to enter into an excursus on the terror involved in thinking honestly about God's ways with us and then back to the matter of liturgical practice.

What God-seekers risk: An excursus on facing terror

Monica Furlong, speaking about liturgy as keeping us in touch without our getting too close to God, distinguished between ordinary churchgoers and "god-seekers." She observed that god-seekers risk more than the ordinary. They risk their sanity—their healthy adjustment to conventional thinking—by opening themselves to powerful disclosures of the divine. The rest of us, less adventuresome, go to church. But it is possible to be both a churchgoer and a god-seeker, as the nature-writer and uncommon Christian mystic Annie Dillard shows us in her writing.

"God's Tooth" is what Dillard titles her reflection on an unexpected encounter with the divine near Bellingham, Washington. The narrative is as straightforward as a news story. A light plane crashes; a child's face and neck are burned; the little girl is hospitalized. Annie Dillard has met the child, Julie; in fact, "we looked alike." The event pulls Dillard into its undertow of terror. She dares to say what the pious will not utter: "God is a brute and a traitor." I will cite her on this point at some length.[7]

> So this is where we are. Ashes, ashes, all fall down. How could I have forgotten? ... The great ridged granite millstone of time is illusion...the great ridged granite millstone of space is illusion...but the illusions are almost perfect for generations on end, and the pain is also, and undeniably real.... And you get caught holding one end of a love, when your father drops, and your mother...your friend blotted out, gone...and cold, your dead infant, and you dying: you reel out love's long line alone, stripped like a live wire losing its sparks to a cloud, like a live wire loosed in space to longing and grief everlasting.

Dillard names the truth she sees that day. Human life is lonely, then we are felled. But the illusions of security are almost perfect.

Who is God in relation to us in this great longing and grief? Is it possible to pray in these circumstances? Dillard, too, wonders on that day senseless tragedy struck her young neighbor.

> Who will teach us to pray? The God of today is a glacier. We live in his shifting crevasses, unheard.... We are precisely nowhere, sinking on an entirely imaginary ice flow into entirely imaginary seas themselves adrift. Then we reel out love's long line alone to a God less loveable than a grasshead, who treats us less well than we treat our lawns.

Dillard, the truth-telling god-seeker, refuses to quit her quest to meet God, however unlovely the God she might find. As she sits looking out her window onto Puget Sound on the late November afternoon following Julie's blazing fall from the sky, she makes a note: "...a new thing appeared, as if we needed a new thing." Of this new thing she says, "I draw it [on my chart] as I seem to see it." What it really is, "I have no way of knowing.... I name it Terror, the Farthest Limb of the Day, God's Tooth."

But that is not the end. Dillard's continued reflection the following day begins,

Baptized Christians sing and read and preach and dunk and oil and eat and drink away uncertainty.

surprisingly, "I only know enough of God to want to worship him, by any means ready to hand."[8] But what is at hand to work with? Dillard had been making her way to churches with some regularity since her Presbyterian childhood in Pittsburgh.[9] The Bible is one thing at hand. She recalls the story of the man born blind, and the assurance of Jesus that he is not blind for any good reason—that is, to punish him or his parents—but rather so that the works of God can be manifest. Dillard finds this answer baffling and infuriating as a response to one of the few questions she thinks worth asking, namely, "What in the Sam Hill is going on here?" Her reflection is mystagogical. She questions the scripture and lets the revealed text question her. "Do we need blind men stumbling about and flamefaced children, to remind us what God can—and will—do?" The answer to her question is doxological, even if it is risky to listen to—riskier than the answer of sermons and

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[7] Quotations are from Annie Dillard, "God's Tooth," Part II, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 35–51.

[8] Quotations here are from Part III, 55–68.

[9] Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 132–35.

liturgies that seek to smooth the rough edges of the divine.

> Yes, in fact, we do. We do need reminding, not of what God can do but of what he cannot do, or will not, which is to catch time in its free fall and stick a nickel's worth of sense into our days. And we need reminding of what time can do, must only do; churn out enormity at random and beat it, with God's blessing, into our heads: that we are created, *created*, sojourners in a land we did not make, a land with no meaning of itself and no meaning we can make for it alone. Who are we to demand explanations of God?..."God is at home," says Meister Eckhart, "We are in the far country."

Dillard's dark musings are disrupted. She must go into town to buy the communion wine for the Lord's Supper. The church's liturgy is another means at hand for worshipping God.

Carrying the bottle of California red in her backpack, "a backload of God," "Christ with a cork," she begins to see into things as she walks the road home. Everything addresses her. "Why are there all these apples in the world, and why so wet and transparent?" The waters of Puget Sound ahead of her transform into a setting for the baptism of Christ. As he lifts up, she notes,

> Water beads on his shoulders.... I deepen into a drop and see all that time contains, all the faces and deeps of the worlds, and all the earth's contents, every landscape and room, everything living or made or fashioned, all past or future stars, and especially faces, faces like the cells of everything, faces pouring past me and talking, and going, and gone. And I am gone.... The surface of things outside the drops has fused. Christ himself, and the others, and the brown warm wind and hair, sky, the beach, the shattered water—all this has fused. It is the one glare of holiness; it is bare and unspeakable.... There is only this everything.

Having seen this mystical fusion and dissolution of Christ and the material world—herself within it—Dillard walks on home.

She instructs her readers: "You must rest now. I cannot rest you. For me, there is, I am trying to tell you, no time." Consequent upon her encounter with cosmic randomness, Dillard finds herself at home in Meister Eckhart's "far country," and also, a day later, at home in church. But what can happen in a pew, after she has seen the terror and the cosmic wholeness of human existence with the ripping open of the heavens and the falling of the plane? She explains. Responding to the psalmist's question, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place?" she affirms:

> There is no one but us. There is no one to send...but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready.... But there is no one but us. There never has been.

Evasion of the mystery of human existence is endemic to human being, even for pew-sitters who believe that Jesus is the mystery incarnate, the Way, the Truth, the Life. Dillard continues:

> There have been generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day. Yet some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dream for description, and fancy that life has devolved. So. You learn this studying any history at all, especially the lives of artists and visionaries; you learn it from Emerson, who noticed that the meanness of our days is itself worth our thought; and *you learn it, fitful in your pew, in church.*"[10]

Dillard offers her readers an unflinching account of God as holy terror for humans. But she holds this fearful disclosure in balance with an equally sharp view from her pew in the local church. Formal liturgy—baptizing, celebrating the Lord's Supper—encourages boldness even in the face of mortal danger.

> I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed.... The higher Christian churches...come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealing with God.[11]

And in this way Dillard calls us back to the point Furlong affirmed. Liturgy conceals as well as reveals divine mystery.

People in the pews do not deny terror; they need it tamed. The classic liturgies of our cherished traditions, what Dillard calls our "set pieces," refract in fragments the truth about God's relationship with us humans. The God of our liturgical doxologies has many moments, and even two millennia after the revelation made in Christ hung on a cross, no one generation has yet seen God whole, because we focus selectively on the facets that disclose what we are looking for. And what we are looking for is what appears to us as in our best interest. We want to worship the One who makes our mortal lives bearable.

The future of liturgy in late modernity

Revisiting the Book of Job. Late modern theologian Paul Lakeland recommends that we consider the three "gods" set out in the Book of Job as a way of making sense of our late modern and postmodern problem with God.[12] The biblical narrator presents us with believers who think they know God well. Lakeland names their familiar gods "petty tyrant" and "awesome judge." The petty tyrant god has no scruples about crushing Job in order to prove something to the avenging angel. The awesome judge god behaves more like us, punishing bad behavior and rewarding good. No one is ready for the whirlwind, the God disconcertingly unready to make everything go well for Job, the One underwhelmed by Job's difficulties and resistant to his complaints, yet quite excited about everything else: the snow, the light, the stars, desert blooms, the birth pangs of the hind, the grass-eating Behemoth and the intrepid and proud Leviathan. Lakeland sees in the Book of Job a parable of the emerging postmodern situation of the church.

What are churchgoers to make of a God who seems not to give humans undivided attention and protection? Reflecting on the contentious relationship that God takes up with Job, Lakeland wonders: Can it be that God is telling us humans that we take ourselves too seriously and yet not seriously enough? Too seriously, because we consider ourselves infinitely more precious to God than the gases that explode, the atoms that crash into one another, the cosmic matter hurtling though space organizing and then letting go in time's grand free fall. We demand God's total attention to our needs. In fact, we humans spin theodicies in our effort to explain to ourselves how God's providence could ever allow us to languish or suffer. Not seriously enough, because we humans want some extraterrestrial presence to eliminate our burdens or at least

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[10] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 56–7, emphasis added.

[11] Dillard, 59.

[12] Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 96–98.

Two millennia after the revelation made in Christ hung on a cross, no one generation has yet seen God whole....

ease them. We want nothing of cosmic terror such as the earth itself knows when the continental plates rip apart or when it turns its fiery interior inside out, disgorging its contents. Like Job, we are unready to concede that we simply share the lot of the world in which we find ourselves.[13]

Still, Job seems more docile than most. When God confronts Job with his human hybris: "I will question you, and you tell me the answers!...Would you condemn me that you may be justified?" (40:7–8 NAB) Job concedes that what is going on eludes him:

> I have dealt with great things that I
> do not understand;
> things too wonderful for me,
> which I cannot know...
> Therefore I disown what I have said,
> and repent in dust and ashes.
> (42:3,6 NAB)

How many of us are as ready to give up on our claims to self-importance, even with God?

Lakeland locates the saving gift of the Incarnation in this situation of our human resistance to the truth about our human selves. We are creatures, like everything around us. Yet we are creatures the Creator must deal with in a distinctive way because we are that part of creation that came to consciousness. The provident Creator has provided for us according to our nature. And, says Lakeland, looking at the history of human consciousness and the achievements of cultures and civilizations, the truth of our human nature is quite evident. We humans organize our environments around ourselves. We construct meaning, with ourselves at the center, and so try to overcome the terror of our hurtling free fall in the cosmos. We demand that God be present to us and we complain about our experiences of God's absence. God's concession to our self-conscious nature, says the theologian with postmodern sensibilities, is to be present to us, but by way of intentional absence. Following Lakeland's thought, God's presence in the mode of intentional absence is the paradoxical idea we need to consider next,[14] keeping the paradox in our original frame: Doxology, yes: but who is our God?

Reinterpreting the Incarnation. Lakeland describes the situation of the late-modern believer with characteristic late modern starkness. God, who alone possesses the universal, i.e., cosmic, standpoint, "perceives the minor place human beings hold in the universe, alongside their bottomless capacity to interpret it as a very major place, indeed to see themselves as the hermeneutical key to the universe."[15] What humans need in our delusionary condition, and what God offers us according to our need, is love—but the love we *need* is not necessarily the love we *want*. God directs us to love one another, to bear one another's burdens, to care for one another. God's gift to us,

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[13] Lakeland, 45–46.

[14] The same issue is taken up in Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. P. Madigan and M. Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, A Pueblo Book, 1995).

[15] Lakeland, 100.

God's revelatory deed, is our free human agency, limited but real.

Jesus of Nazareth gives flesh to this revelation, a divine disclosure in a mode appropriate to our human nature. As Lakeland says, "The drama of Christ the human God, like that of all human beings, is one of learning self-surrender." Now "God knows this human pain of letting go only in Christ" —knows personally through Jesus of Nazareth "the contingency and tragedy of our human being." Jesus the Christ discloses the way of human redemption as self-emptying love in obedience to God's design for our human kind.

Yet the path Jesus walked led directly toward his cross. Lakeland points out that the tragedy of our human kind is there to contemplate for those who are risk takers.

> In the death of Christ on the cross one sees at once the destructive freedom of the human race in face of the divine, and [also] a representation of exactly the message of the divine for the human, namely, that human selflessness, self-abnegation, and the embrace of failure are the way in which the world can be saved from and for itself.[16]

Lakeland would have the ecclesial community be risk takers. He names the church the community of revelation within the larger human community. Its members know the unadorned truth of things (even if churches cannot celebrate it unadorned, as I shall argue later). In Lakeland's theological reflection, as in Dillard's contemplative musing, God will not save humans from our free fall in space and time; after all, God did not spare his sole-begotten child. Rather God directs us to love one another, for mutual love alone can redeem the tragedy of our finitude. This intentional absence, says Lakeland, *is* God's relationship with the human part of creation. Such is God's gift to us in Christ Jesus.

The necessity of the doxological. I want to say more than Lakeland makes explicit, for I think the church knows more. Lakeland's reflection on how we are to be church in the present cultural situation ironically short-circuits the very truth about our human nature that he wants us to accept, namely, that we are self-centered and that the God who created us knows us for who we are. Church pews are lined with Christian people who do not want to hear a message that God's presence is God's intentional absence from our affairs and who, upon hearing it, would refuse to believe it, if only because it contradicts received traditions of the apostolic faith. Neither the people in the pews nor their pastors are equipped to give an account of their Christian life in such terms. They want to give thanks for God's presence in their lives and open themselves and the world to God's continuing mercy. They want the world to stay in God's hands, not in theirs, certainly not in the free-fall of space and time.

It can be left to other theologians and cultural commentators to weigh in on the plausibility and authenticity of Lakeland's apologetic for church as a self-emptying public presence in late modern American culture, a culture which has exhausted its confidence in reasoned arguments for the existence of God and which suspects as "special interest" all proclamation about what makes for a good life. In these reflections it is necessary to turn to aspects of the church's faith, those clustered in the third article of the creed, that Lakeland leaves undeveloped: the resurrection of Jesus, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the place of corporate liturgical worship.

Sacramentum ad hominem was how the medievals captured the point of regular public worship. Liturgical practice serves

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[16] Lakeland, 109.

human needs. Humans who are to become human epiphanies to the world of the world's salvation need sacramental liturgy to express, to explore, and to appropriate Christian identity. Baptized though Christians may be, we still share the common human lot. Baptismal initiation is only the start of making recognizable Christians of our human kind; the eucharistic liturgy is the necessary ecclesial process of continuing Christian initiation. As world history shows, even after baptism Christians are still caught up in "the destructive freedom of the human race." Christians, too, are always living at the edge of the terror rising from "the meanness of our days," always viewing reality from the narcissistic centers of our own worlds. So every generation of Christians needs the lifelong formative discipline of a gathered community of believers retelling and appropriating pieces of the story of Jesus in order to de-center and re-center our lives. To confirm our reorientation, we need to give thanks for the disclosure of the mystery of the world's salvation as God's gift revealed in Jesus and to open ourselves to a share in his Holy Spirit. Without this exercise (i.e. *ascesis)*, the church will weaken and disappear.

Accordingly, I think Furlong's and Dillard's insights provide a necessary complement to the ecclesial apologia of a late-modern Christian theologian like Paul Lakeland. Monica Furlong and Annie Dillard point out two graced paths for coming to the fullness of revelation that God is uncommon love, that self-emptying love is of God, and that the church's mission is to be public witness everywhere on earth to that love. The way of the mystic, the "god-seeker," is risky because it is a solitary path that can veer quickly toward despair or self-deception if it is pursued without guidance. The way of liturgical doxology works a slower transformation generation after generation. But it is suited to those of us, baptized but alternately brash, naive, and fearful, who will comprehend and come to trust God's love of us in Christ only slowly as the way of the cross.

If Lakeland does not speak of the church's liturgical doxology practice, perhaps it is because the God he would have us confess is too stern for our narcissist selves to laud with any enthusiasm. Perhaps his omission is simpler—that he had developed his apologia for a postmodern church and then stopped, without asking how such a way of being church might be sustained with authenticity.[17] We must probe further. My next presentation will argue that the church Lakeland would have us be in the late modern and postmodern world—a church mature enough to love as God would have us love—can only be constituted and sustained through renewed liturgical doxology. Liturgy is not just one available form of Christian religious practice among many. It is a constitutive element of the church. Regular liturgical celebration has sustained the church to the present, through Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine cultures, through the Enlightenment and the age of revolutions. It will keep the church—including its most risky God-seekers—connected to the mystery of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ in whatever culture the church might yet find itself, even in postmodern America.

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[17] Lakeland speaks in passing of "Spirit theologies" (p. 58) but not of the Holy Spirit of Christ Jesus. So also reflections on "ecclesiality" and "spirituality" make no link to this aspect of the Christian mystery.

Liturgical Celebration as Ecclesial Construction

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Two Lutheran documents on liturgy and a related text came to my desk recently. The first was the ELCA study guide "Getting Ready for Worship in the Twenty-First Century," an invitation to reflect on that year's Nairobi Statement on Liturgy and Culture developed by the Lutheran World Federation; the second was the ELCA 1997 Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament titled "The Use of the Means of Grace;" and the third was Gordon Lathrop's article in the November 1998 *Worship*.[1] Read together, they tuned me in to a continuing conversation taking place among Lutherans about the values and challenges inherent in maintaining your received liturgical tradition. The existence of contemporary intermural Lutheran conversations on liturgy signals rumbling in the background, some atmospheric disturbance unsettling things in the church.

Lutherans are evidently wondering whether what Lutherans do on Sunday mornings is appropriate Christian religious practice for the times. Should they stay the course provided by the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship*, with its plan for celebration of Holy Communion each Sunday, including proclamation and preaching guided by the Common Lectionary? Should local congregations who want something "more traditional" backtrack and retrieve earlier Lutheran Sunday practices? Or should Lutherans at least try something more suited to the expectations of an entertainment culture where people shop around for what they call "good" worship?

Confusion about whether to stay the course, backtrack, or move with the times is not peculiarly Lutheran. A young friend of mine who teaches music in an urban Catholic school reported one day's questions she had from eighth graders preparing for their Confirmation liturgy according to the official Roman rite. "Why can't we sing in Latin?" "Why are we singing Spanish?" "Are we going to have any other entertainment besides this at Confirmation?"

Irritating as questions about particular practices might seem to liturgical ministers, the questioning in our churches needs to be more radical still. Why do liturgy of any kind at all? What would happen if the churchly activity we call liturgical worship were suspended for a time or stopped permanently? What would happen if we decided not to use this particular "means of

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[1] Gordon Lathrop, "New Pentecost or Joseph's Britches? Reflections on the History and Meaning of the Worship Ordo in the Megachurches" *(Worship* 72 [1998]*)*, 521-38. The ELCA documents are available through Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis.

grace"? Who really needs it? Should it be just one worship option among many other spiritual paths available to American Lutherans? My own perspective is suggested in the title of this piece: "Liturgical Celebration as Ecclesial Construction." Theology, story, and the human sciences concur: no liturgy, no church. The basic issue at stake in the celebration of the liturgy on the eve of the twenty-first Christian century is nothing less than the construction and maintenance of shared ecclesial identity.

To develop my argument, I will draw on biblical wisdom available to us through two Jewish writers, Elie Wiesel and Abraham Joshua Heschel, to consider the purpose of recurrent liturgical celebrations. Then, drawing on the concept of liturgical rites as "serious play," I will focus on the liturgical celebration of the Word of God in order to interpret our common but also contentious liturgical heritage with an assist from some contemporary ritual theorists. Finally, I will look at the way strong liturgical celebration of the Word of God can provide a corrective to cultural errors and misunderstandings about how the church relates to biblical revelation.

Relationships and stories about them

As a prelude to the stories, two starting points need to be identified. These are theological assumptions I am making. First, religious identity, like human social identity, is constituted through relationships. Liturgy affirms and explores the church's relationship with the God we do and do not know nor perhaps even want to see directly. Paul Lakeland's theological formulation of this divine-human relationship might seem unduly harsh—"God's presence to us is God's intentional absence."[2] Yet when we listen carefully to our own statements of belief we must admit Lakeland is stating gospel truth. God's gift to us is Jesus. With us for a while, the glorified Christ Jesus is gone from us. God's continuing gift to us is the Holy Spirit of Jesus, a spirit of self-emptying love reaching outward. The Spirit of Jesus is both Comforter and Teacher, a Spirit we must learn to recognize and trust as the way of salvation. The church further believes that the Holy Spirit is given to us not simply for ourselves but for the well-being of the world.

Christian religious identity comes into public view when the church publicly celebrates the relationships that it believes constitute the world's salvation. In the church's liturgy, the Holy Spirit of Jesus alive in the community discloses through the ritual process how the local churches are to live within human history. Week by week liturgical communities should be learning to embrace their shared identity and mission in their own particular times and places. Because the church is itself always learning and also resisting its own mystery —*ecclesia semper reformanda*—inauthenticity is always present, like the biblical tares always crowding out the grain. Despite choking weeds in the liturgical garden, the church's liturgy is what a modern theorist calls "strategic practice." The living symbolic process that is the church's liturgical tradition is put to contemporary use to serve a good purpose.[3] What that purpose is leads to two stories about ritualizing the divine-human relationship. Both

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[2] Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). The exploration of presence-absence occurs in my first essay of this series, "Doxology, Yes: But Who Is Our God?" (pp. 246–56 in this volume).

[3] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 81-82.

are told by Elie Wiesel, who has wrestled for a lifetime with this relationship. This first story is autobiographical; the second is parabolic.

Two stories. Wiesel tells how for years he refused to pray Kaddish on the anniversary of his father's death. He would not praise God as the source of life and blessing because his father had died an unspeakable death in the Nazi camps. Yet Wiesel maintained his contentious relationship to the God who had been indifferent to his father. He did so precisely by remembering religiously how the anniversary of a parent's death was to be marked and then refusing to honor his religious obligation. One year, the day came and he said the prayer.[4] Timely remembrance of the unfathomable divine-human relationship is the point to hold on to from this first narrative.

The parabolic story appears as prologue to *Gates of the Forest.*[5] The people of the town were in trouble. Their rabbi went to the holy place, lit the fire, and chanted the prayer; and God delivered the people from their trouble. Time passed, and a new rabbi came. The people were in danger once again. The rabbi knew of the people's custom and went to the holy place and lit the fire. But he had no knowledge of the traditional prayers. Still, what he did was enough; God delivered the people from the danger. More time passed. Another rabbi, another generation. It too knew trouble. The newest rabbi located the customary holy place. But he had not heard about lighting the fire; and of course the memory of the traditional prayers was long forgotten. Still, what he did was enough. God delivered the people. Yet another generation, another rabbi, more trouble. The newest rabbi sat in his study, thinking to himself about what he had heard from the people about their past and what they once did to approach to God. That, too, was enough, and again God delivered the people. Wiesel concludes: God made people because God loves stories—stories about the divine-human relationship remembered and affirmed.

> The divine-human relationship is maintained by timely mutual remembering.

Both narratives make a single point. They confirm the biblical disclosure that the divine-human relationship is maintained by timely mutual remembering. Remembering the relationship—however tenuous it might become—is key. A relationship remembered is alive. A relationship forgotten is no relationship at all.

The divine-human relationship. What relationship is at stake in both of Elie Wiesel's stories? The Book of Exodus says it began in Egypt, during that series of episodes on the fields of Tanis, at the Reed Sea, in the desert, and at Mount Sinai. A distinctive understanding of the divine-human relationship was discerned in what came to be called the Exodus event. Those who were not previously a people came to be a people through those shared experiences and the trust they put in Moses's and Miriam's interpretation of that common experience.

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[4] Elie Wiesel, "The Death of My Father," in *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), 15-21.

[5] Elie Wiesel, *Gates of the Forest* (New York: Avon Books, 1966), 6-10.

However, as time passed, maintaining that identity and correlative trust in the reliability of the original interpretation required work. The distinctive kind of work witnessed to in the biblical narrative was the keeping of memorials in time.

Memorial markers at places of a divine-human encounter were certainly familiar in the ancient world. Yet, as Heschel notes, the distinctiveness of Israel's memorial construction is the memorial in time.[6] Keeping a memorial in time—keeping a Sabbath—is named in the list of obligations integral to the Sinai covenant. The strategic practice that maintained Israel's identity among all the peoples around them was the shared symbolic process of Sabbath observance, public acknowledgment every seventh day of their understanding of the divine-human relationship. Circumstances of history often disrupted the cohesion of the people born from the Exodus-Sinai event. Yet keeping memorials in time—the Sabbath and feasts and seasons—maintained awareness generation after generation of the divine-human relationship into which they had been drawn, and awareness of that relationship has kept the heirs of the Sinai covenant in existence as people.

Memorials of a continuing relationship. Keeping the memorial in time—weekly, occasional, annual—is work, the people's work. But it is also a divine gift, a revelatory disclosure of how people living in history can maintain mutuality in the mystery: "I will be your God; you will be my people." There are things to be done and said during each of the timely memorials. The work is learned by intergenerational doing, but it is always adapted as needed in local circumstances. Consider the flexibility related to the rite of the paschal lamb. For many generations, the slaughter of the lamb and the ritual meal at the vernal equinox was a household or clan occasion for remembering the relationship disclosed in the Exodus event. Circumstances changed, and for subsequent generations priestly slaughter of lambs at the Jerusalem temple became preferred practice. Circumstances changed again. Twice, after the temple was destroyed, the ritual slaughter was abandoned, the second time permanently.[7] But the relationship was not abandoned. What sustained it was timely memorial, public celebration of the divine-human relationship. At the vernal equinox, when it was time, the people used the ritual practices, the seder or order that had been handed on to them, improvising in strategic ways to express their present identity in a living relationship. The relationship, whatever its current form, had an origin which needed repeated narration; it had a history to be learned from; it had a promised future, the understanding of which had to be worked at.

Sometimes the work of keeping memorials was done elaborately; at other times and places memorials in time were starkly simple. At the core of every liturgical memorial, past or present, is the relationship with God disclosed in the particular set of shared experiences which Moses and Miriam had interpreted. Always the narrative of the divine-human relationship has had to be tested against the people's contemporary experience—most recently in the light of the Holocaust and currently in light of the conflict over "land for peace." Dissonance has had to be struggled with, and insight has been welcomed or resisted. Yet keeping memorial has meant reaffirming the fundamental relationship revealed to

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[6] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), 79-83.

[7] Some Jewish seders take note of this circumstance by using a lamb shank bone on the ritual platter while eating a meal that does not include lamb.

earlier generations—but always reaffirming on the basis of the people's current experience, their learned trust, and their learned hope.

The Jewish tradition of memorials in time appears complex to the outsider overwhelmed by ritual details. Even insiders have to be instructed. "Why is this night different?"[8] Yet the truth is that the Jewish system of liturgical memorials is eminently redundant. While each memorial seems tied to different historical or heroic fictionalized episodes in the life of the people Israel, all the memorials—Sabbath, Passover and Pentecost, Yom Kippur, Sukkoth, Purim, the praying of Kaddish for a deceased parent, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah—are about the same relationship as it was understood and lived out, well or ill, in particular circumstances. This complex tradition of corporate memorials in time, one of the principal vehicles for continuing initiation into the Jewish people's faith in its relationship with the living God, reflects an underlying insight into the human religious condition that the Christian church carried forward. Remembering ourselves in relation to God requires repeated and timely work. Hence liturgical assemblies.

Heschel showed how maintaining memorials in time was an ingenious (= inspired?) strategic practice for a nomadic people. They did not have to gather at particular locales to do their symbolic ritual-remembering. Wherever they found themselves, when the time came, the time claimed them. Christian generations have been the beneficiaries of this ancient wisdom. The church is not a place but a people maintaining relationships with the Triune God. When the churches began to maintain buildings, these were simply "houses for the church." This imperative of timeliness was reaffirmed by the worldwide assembly of Catholic bishops in what seemed to many a minor, even odd, appendix to their 1963 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.[9] Acknowledging that in a changing global culture there are good reasons in support of a revised perpetual civil calendar, Catholic bishops noted that they would have no objection to any calendar reform "which would retain and safeguard a seven-day week including Sunday." Who needs a seven-day week? People of biblical faith need it; and the regular turning of seven days is what the tradition names a "means of grace." Timely public memorials are foundational for church building and maintenance; they are "pylons in time" for a people moving forward in human history as the people of God.[10]

Serious play in the liturgical memorial

That the church gathers on the Lord's Day is essential to its continued existence. The wisdom of this traditional religious practice of public ritualizing of the revealed divine-human relationship finds support in contemporary human and social science theories of world-building and in theological discourse. Yet a second point follows. *What* churches do when they are gathered in timely assembly affects and effects *the kind of church* that will arise locally and

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[8] The 5-year-old child who entered the pew ahead of me for last year's Easter Vigil asked her mother and all of us around her, "Are the lights broken? Why is it dark in here?" If nothing notable is being done, there are no questions.

[9] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. "Declaration on Revision of the Calendar." Translation in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 177-78.

[10] The phrase is appropriated from Adelbert de Vogue, commentator on the Rule of Benedict.

globally on those pylons in time. In order to focus the exploration, we will consider traditions of celebrating the biblical Word in the liturgical event, that is, the ritual proclamation of the Word. I must here affirm Catholic indebtedness to Lutheran insistence on preaching the Word in the assembly. As a Catholic, I wish to make the case for equally serious ritual play in the liturgical assembly.[11]

Alexander Schmemann, Orthodox liturgical theologian, complained mid-century, during liturgical reform and renewal in the Western church, that the churches East and West were unclear about the purpose of their liturgical action, a situation for which he gave full credit to systematic theologians.[12] His judgment about misperceiving the point of liturgical action would not have surprised ritual theorist Catherine Bell, who has argued effectively that one of the characteristics of ritual symbolic action is misrecognition on the part of participants about what is occurring.[13] Schmemann's own insight into the liturgical event led him to call it an *epiphany*, that is, an event in which the Spirit-filled church reveals to itself its own mystery. In liturgical action the church makes visible its own interiority. Or, as I have expressed it, the church intends to make visible all the relationships that, taken together, give it its identity as the church of Jesus Christ. The means to do this is the ritual symbolic process.[14]

As was suggested earlier, what the assembled church intends in its liturgical action is disclosing, affirming, and maintaining in its own historical circumstances the divine-human relationship disclosed in the Christ event. "Christ event" stands as shorthand for the series of episodes remembered and interpreted by the apostolic generations in their communal practices and the canonical Scriptures, as "Exodus event" names the formative experiences giving rise to Jewish faith and practice and canonical Scriptures. The concluding observation of the Gospel according to John—"There are still many other things that Jesus did, yet if they were written about in detail, I doubt there would be room enough in the entire world to hold the books to record them" (21:25)—aptly captures something of the liturgical situation. No single liturgical memorial can give expression to every aspect of the divine-human relationship revealed in Christ. This cannot surprise us, because even human relationships elude our capacity to express them in their fullness. Nevertheless, there are distinctive strategies characteristic of the church's liturgy that, taken together, effectively express a faith that transcends what can be said or thought clearly.

Meaning beyond doctrinal formulations. If the wisdom of the sixteenth-century reformers and the wisdom of the Catholic community concerning biblical faith and its

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[11] In my original oral presentation, a three-minute segment from Thomas Kane's video "The Dancing Church" (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995) showed the celebration of the Entrance of the Gospel into a Sunday assembly at a Poor Clare Monastery in Malawai, West Africa.

[12] Alexander Schmemann, "Liturgy and Theology," in *Liturgy and Tradition*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1990), 53-55.

[13] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 82; 108-10.

[14] My colleague Margaret Mary Kelleher has developed a carefully argued explanation of how the local liturgical assembly continually brings itself into being by symbolically expressing its own self-understanding through this ritual process. She calls the liturgical action of the assembled community of the baptized the "self-realization" of the church. To accomplish its symbolic self-realization the church works with its common memory and shared symbols. "Liturgy: An Ecclesial Act of Meaning," *Worship* 59 (1985): 494-96.

liturgical expression were long perceived to be in serious conflict, clinging to that conflict at the end of the twentieth century is anachronistic. Renewed understanding of how the church uses the Scripture liturgically can illuminate the liturgical unit that contemporary Catholics call the "liturgy of the Word," and Lutherans more typically designate as "proclamation of the Word." To explore this liturgical unit as ritual play is not to advocate diminishing liturgy to the status of entertainment. Rather, I hope to show that seriously playful liturgical celebration is the best challenge to misperceptions about the purpose of public worship.



The Word in the assembly is one of the most complex among the church's liturgical symbols. In its physical materiality as a book, the Word can be perceived primarily as a text, and so misperceived. For the Word by which the church comes to self-realization is not a text but Christ Jesus risen and glorified, to whom the biblical text witnesses. In order to point to the "more" beyond the material texts, the church developed ritual strategies for handling the book of the Word in the assembly. The strategies of ritual handling are forms of serious play aimed at expressing the church's relationship with the living Word—never to be confused with trivialization or irreverence. We know of the living synagogue practice, where members—men, and now even women—take their turns dancing ecstatically with the Torah scroll at the annual feast of Simhat Torah, when the annual cycle of reading is completed and the new cycle is about to begin. Ritualized hugging and foot-stomping can be fitting praise—sometimes the only praise that fits the occasion. Learning Torah by heart, interpreting it midrashically, and dancing one's relationship to it are equally serious and playful. They all serve the single purpose of keeping people in touch with the God who is the giver of Torah.

Strategies for serious play with the Word were also devised in the Christian churches as the New Testament writings were canonized within the context of their use in liturgical assemblies. Two major sources for Christian ritual practices with the biblical word are readily identifiable: the practice of the ancient synagogue and practices of Hellenistic imperial cultures. From the Semitic milieu come rituals appropriate to a teacher reading and explaining a text from the teacher's desk (Lk 4:14-22). From the milieu of imperial culture come particular strategies for negotiating public expressions of ultimate significance.

Concerning the public reading and explaining of a designated text, we know from abundant historical data that this is core behavior in the churches, an ecclesial constant. The oral address ritualizes the church's faith that the Word of God is a living Word spoken to each generation. The formal interpretation by church office holders ritualizes the church's faith that the Paraclete continues to teach the church, explaining all things. (Recurrent movements for lay preaching throughout the history of the

church involve symbolic negotiation of beliefs about the baptismal gift of the Spirit.) Ritualized attending and responding to the public reading of a biblical text are part of the symbolic process through which the

The ritual process intends as its outcome the believing community's heartfelt reaffirmation of its relationship to the Triune God.

Christian people express and appropriate their identity as people formed in relationship to the Word.

Yet how the book of the Word is to be presented publicly, through whose voice it is to become a living Word, what portions should be read and how they may appropriately be interpreted—the strategic practices for the liturgy of the Word—have been subject to wide variations. The case can be made that the variations in the symbolic processes of relating to the Word have theological valence; they are symbolic expression of the self-understanding of communities in the times and places in which the church finds itself.[15]

Concerning the practice of public reading, it is true that certain strategies have taken on normative or quasi-normative status within the great tradition that is the church catholic. For example, lists of Bible readings originally drawn up for particular circumstances found wider circulation and gained authority in communities that had no extant list or were not terribly vested in the lists available to them.[16] Lists gave rise to books of lections, yet before long some would argue that books of readings constrained the Word. Others would subsequently argue that free choice of texts for the assembly according to the personal preference of the pastor was an even greater constraint of the Holy Spirit. In the debates over appropriate texts, it became easier to overlook the fact that such reading in the assembly is *ritual* reading—a symbolic process that intends to point to the core relationship, not to explain it apodictically. So, too, liturgical preaching is a ritual act, not a systematic study of a text. The ritual process intends as its outcome the believing community's heartfelt reaffirmation of its relationship to the Triune God to whom the scripture witnesses. This ought not to be solely dependent on the rhetorical skills of the homilist or preacher. So reading and preaching is only part of the ritual process that is the liturgy of the Word. The liturgical tradition provides for correlative ways of expressing the centrality of the living Word in the life of the people.

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[15] Thomas A. Kane's second video, "The Dancing Church of the South Pacific" (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) captures a moment of serious ritual play in a Eucharist liturgy among an unlettered tribal people. Two elders enact their puzzled finding of a book, their curiosity about its appearance among them, and their turning to a literate daughter of the tribe to announce its message to them. The interaction is prelude to the proclamation of the Word.

[16] G. G. Willis, "The Influence of the Stations on the Liturgy," *Further Essays on Roman Liturgy* (Alcuin Club Collection No. 50. London: SPCK, 1968), 78-85, offers interesting insight into how an occasional local arrangement of lections took on authority as a traditional list.

Among the most familiar of these correlative ritual behaviors—strategies to augment interaction between and among central symbols—are practices that have survived well beyond the cultures in which they arose. Some that persist in high liturgical traditions are recognizably imperial in their inspiration. Their original use was a subversive redirection of popular understanding about ultimate significance. Did torches and incense precede the entrance into the assembly of the imperial party? Then torches and incense would appropriately accompany the entrance of the Word into the midst of the assembly. Was the enthroned emperor one before whom everyone must bow? Then the Word would be enthroned, and those who approached would bow low before it. Was the emperor adorned with garnet, ruby, sapphire, and gold? So the book of the Word would appear more splendid yet. Did the emperor move through the crowd with arm or scepter raised up? The book of the Word would be held high above the people, as the true standard for judgment and for mercy. Was it required court protocol that petitioners approach the emperor through designated intermediaries? Then that officeholder designated to act for the church in God's name would voice and interpret the Word of God.

Many such practices used in the ritual process to disclose the church's relationship to the Word have persisted in Orthodox and Catholic communions as preconscious ritual strategies. The serious play effectively dethroned imperial pretensions. Yet the practices were also able to miscue some liturgical players into pretensions of their own. Furthermore, in its cultivation of imperial practices the church of earlier generations left unexpressed other dimensions of its relationship with the living Word. There were always gifts of the Spirit alive in the church concealed by the imperial symbolic process; these were pressing inexorably toward social visibility and verbal thematization.

And so it came to pass that sixteenth-century church reformers in the West wanted to halt too much serious playing with the Word and to get on with the serious business of teaching it more explicitly in a changed situation. For the reformers, as for Francis of Assisi and his friars before them, if the gospel was to be good news to the poor, more was needed than that the people ritualize their conviction that their lives were tied to this mute and mysterious Word. They needed to know that the Word was addressed to them and carried direct implications for the way they lived their lives. The Word needed not only to be celebrated —carried in procession, incensed, and bowed to—but also to be preached. To borrow from the contemporary French sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet, "a symbol is simultaneously a vehicle for cognition and recognition."[17] The medieval symbolic process with the book of the Word physically enacted in a place where only clerics could assemble blocked the baptized people's *recognition* that their identity was tied to the Word of God. Reformers saw equally serious need for fuller *cognition* of the texts themselves which set out the mystery of the divine-human relationship. Clericalized ritual play with the material book at the expense of biblical teaching was taken to be trivialization.

The complementary truth of both impulses—the liturgical assembly's playfully celebrating *and* thoughtfully exploring the implications of the church's relationship to the Word—awaits fuller recovery and ex-

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[17] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. P. Madigan and M. Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 124-28.

pression in the Western churches in the late twentieth century. Ritual playing with the material symbolic object that is the book of the Word, like David's dancing before the Ark of the covenant, or the Malawi people's dancing and ululation at the Entrance of the Gospel[18] engages people affectively, expresses tangibly, and communicates effectively the radical center of ecclesial identity and mission. In the present cultural situation a visceral connection with the Word is essential, for only when both the minister and the people are personally engaged can effective preaching toward conversion and mission follow.

Unfortunately, in many Christian churches that emerged in the sixteenth-century Reformation, this seriously playful mode of religious mediation of the divine-human relationship disclosed in Christ still remains under a cloud of suspicion. More unfortunate yet, the Catholic communion, which ignored the cloud for generations, has belatedly embraced the antique Roman-cum-modern valuation of the orderly and rational over the diffuse symbolic, and has forgotten much of its old ritual playfulness.[19] There has been raised up a generation of Catholics that knows little of incense, torches, processions, bows from the waist, or any symbolic practices whatever that refer to divine mystery revealed in Jesus Christ. Further, despite the intentions of the bishops of the church, it knows little more of the content of the Scripture than did pre-modern Catholic generations. In the barrenness created by the church's forgetfulness of some of one of its traditional means of grace, biblical fundamentalism has taken root and begun to grow. This ecclesial situation is reason to reconsider our too-great confidence in "reasonable" liturgy devoid of artful yet serious play—ritual play and word play—with the great symbols of Christian identity.

Celebrating the word in an era of biblical misunderstanding

The challenge of biblical fundamentalism. The church knows that the living Word that mediates the divine-human relationship is more than text. Yet modern challenges to the historical reliability of the biblical text have pushed American Christians in all the churches toward fundamentalism. The fundamentalist error is to equate revelation with a text read literally without regard to its genre or the church's traditions of interpretation. The spreading error needs correction even in the Catholic and Lutheran ecclesial communities, not simply by lectures on "how to read the Bible," although these can be eminently useful. Biblical fundamentalism can also be countered preconsciously yet effectively by serious liturgical play—strategic ecclesial behavior that sets out in a rich symbolic process the complexity of the relationship that is the mystery of the Word. A strong Sunday celebration of the liturgy of the Word—a beautiful book, a ritualized presentation into the center of the assembly, a distinctive proclamation, interpretation that cuts to the community's quick—points to mystery greater than what finds direct expression in the texts that are Holy Writ. Christian people celebrating this way week

[18] See n. 11 above.

[19] Edmund Bishop's now-classic description "The Genius of the Roman Rite" suggests by inference that the sixteenth-century reformers and the modern Roman liturgical reform share significant cultural sensibilities. However, Bishop stands on its head the charge among conservative Catholics that the Roman reform is a "protestantizing" of the church. If Bishop is correct, both the sixteenth-century and recent Roman Catholics' efforts may be interpreted as revalorization of ancient Roman styles of public performance. *Liturgica Historica* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1918, 12-13.

by week come to understand through the recurrent ritual process that the church is a people shaped by its relationship to the compelling and life-giving Word, even when on any particular occasion both the texts proclaimed and the preacher's words fail to ignite the heart. The culture of biblical fundamentalism can be challenged by liturgical celebration.

The confusion sown by academic biblical scholarship. The error of fundamentalist literalism has an intelligible context, of course. It reflects authentic concern whether modern critical techniques for the interpretation of the biblical Word, even techniques taught under church auspices, inevitably result in an authoritative explaining away of any divine-human relationship altogether. In its liturgical action the church affirms that the authority of the living Word lies not in the words on the printed page but in the Holy Spirit abiding in the church. It is the abiding Spirit who stirs hearts through liturgical proclamation and so makes the proclamation a living Word. Critical academic techniques for biblical study, important as they are for the church's self-understanding, cannot substitute for the mystagogical reading of the biblical Word within the worshiping assembly. When preachers err in this regard, the baptized people soon recognize that they are not being well served.

Mystagogical interpretation has a long and spiritually fruitful place in the history of the liturgical assembly.[20] Although a variety of techniques can be identified, the goal of mystagogy is to discern patterns in the divine-human relationships as these find expression in the narratives, prophetic oracles, poems, parables, legislation, exhortations, and teachings in the Scripture—but always as these relate to the patterns of experience in the lives of the believing faithful that need interpretation, never as an intellectual game. Christian mystagogy

The authority of the living Word lies not in the words on the printed page but in the Holy Spirit abiding in the church.

seeks to discern (if we may recall Annie Dillard [from the previous essay] as well as Lakeland here) the mystery of the divine presence in the post-Resurrection experience of divine absence. Historical-critical readings of texts can frequently serve the larger purpose of mystagogical preaching of the biblical Word. But neither fundamentalist nor historical-critical readings can replace the church's mystagogical reading of Word, which always speaks Christ Jesus and always directs the church to embrace its identity and its mission. The strategic ritual practice in the liturgical assembly just mentioned—traditional gestures, postures, alleluias—have long framed the mystagogical proclamation of the Word. Such frames are needed to protect the church and its pastors from forgetting how to read and understand the Word that is Christ in a too narrowly rational culture.

A third theological consideration commends itself in reflecting on the celebration of the liturgy of the Word. The

[20] Jeffrey P. Baerwald, "Mystagogy," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, a Michael Glazier book, 1990), 881-83.

celebration of the Word in the assembly affirms the church itself as the authoritative community of interpretation. Because anyone can go into a bookstore, buy a Bible, read it, and become an authoritative interpreter in a culture that cherishes the autonomous individual's freedom of expression, there is widespread failure even among the baptized to recognize that the gift of the living Word is given to the whole church and is to be read and interpreted within the full ecclesial communion. The American congregationalist style, too, feeds misunderstanding. The church catholic scattered across the world interprets the Word addressed to the churches. The Scripture cannot be understood simply in the light of personal, congregational or group biases. The Word is gift given to the world, not the possession of *my* people only. So any particular readings of the Word and its demands have always to be contextualized in the light of the readings of the whole church.

This aspect of the mystery, that the Word once spoken resounds in every language and culture to constitute the one church of Jesus Christ, has commonly found inarticulate symbolic expression in the liturgical action. Reading in archaic languages (Latin, Elizabethan English, old church Slavonic) can express the reality that the text, celebrated locally, points to a mystery that transcends the local. Modulating the speaking voice to a chant tone is another seriously playful strategy for acknowledging that the Word voiced here is not an ordinary human word. Similarly, codes that specify that public reading and preaching are to be done by a church office holder or persons authorized by office holders communicate the "otherness" of a text which speaks of mystery—even if a copy can be purchased in paperback at Barnes and Noble or the church bookstore. Naming these particular practices is not advocating any normative role for them. Yet taking note of them invites us to reflect on the available strategies for breaking current constraints on the church's narrowness of vision.

Admittedly, behaviors that constitute traditions of serious play with the Word of God have become awkward for modern peoples living in technological culture as heirs of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Our received culture has valued clarity, rationality, and good order. But culture is on the move, transcending its previous predilection for the rational by moving in a direction that is being called postmodern. The cultural shift raises a non-theological basis for the Western churches to reexamine attitudes toward liturgical practices related to the Word of God.

Postmodernity as liturgical opportunity?

The term "postmodern" does not in itself point to any distinct cultural construct so much as to the breakdown of cultural constructs into fragments and the reassembling of the fragments as *bricolage*, improvised arrangements of what is at hand, whether to solve problems or to construct meanings.[21] Popular culture thrives on bricolage as an alternative to the logical and rational. The cultural development accompanies the discovery of astronomers and astrophysicists that the physical world we call the cosmos, driven by an inner dynamism, has been assembling, fragmenting, and recombining in new configurations from the beginning. Mid-century, W. B. Yeats captured the emerging cultural moment in his oft-encited phrase, "Things fall apart; the center

[21] Thomas More Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 149.

does not hold." At the end of the century, the postmodern observer questions whether "center" has any meaning. In such a milieu of fragmentation and bricolage Christian communities must work at maintaining the core relationships and institutions that give them their identity and sense of purpose.

Interestingly, the western postmodern sensibility as it is reflected in popular culture shares with non-modern and pre-modern cultures a readiness to ritualize what eludes conceptualization.[22] When 13 year-old school children ask, "Will there be any entertainment at the Confirmation?" the question can be heard as confirmation of the adult church's fear that the next generation has no grasp of sacred rite because it is the unredeemed product of the contemporary entertainment culture. As a liturgical theorist, I prefer to entertain the question as a request for seriously playful participation in the mystery of the Holy Spirit in the church. The children, having heard the teaching as Good News, may be asking adult believers whether the mystery they have learned about is it not worth everyone's celebrating extravagantly in the liturgical assembly. What appears in liturgical books as official rites are as dry as the paper on which they are printed without the living Spirit in the celebrating church. My pastoral intuition leads me to ask: Doesn't making a joyful noise before God require more than singing hymn texts about making a joyful noise? Can requests for Sunday "entertainment" by the unchurched, the scarcely churched, or the churched-but-weary, be heard as the desire of people to be stirred by every means possible to remember the unfathomable gift of God offered in Christ in a culture that does everything to make them forget?

My argument is not that we should weaken or displace the central symbols of Christian faith by being more entertaining on Sunday morning. My argument is rather that Lutherans and Catholics together should use all the traditional means available to intensify the gospel's claim on our communities and ourselves. This means becoming more self-aware and self-critical about our reductionist approach to our liturgical heritage. Are we able, for the sake of the gospel, to go beyond the bondage of our own modern ecclesial cultures which overvalue the rational and orderly as means of grace?

The sixteenth-century reformers of the Western church knew something true about the need to preach the Word in the community of the baptized. But so did medieval Christians, and so do pre-modern Catholics and Christian peoples in many nonWestern cultures know the truth about the need to celebrate what cannot be expressed fully in doctrines and words of admonition. Cultural shifts are creating the conditions for the revitalization of too-long rationalized liturgical tradition in the Western church. Ecstatic ritualizing is not antithetic to discursive exposition, just as the beautiful and the intelligible are not at odds in the Holy Spirit's work of building and maintaining the church. All these are traditional means of grace. Where any element is lacking in our liturgical assemblies, it awaits our wise retrieval in new cultural circumstances.

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[22] See Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 27, for a theoretical discussion of the ambiguity surrounding postmodernity's welcome of ritual social processes.

Liturgical Spirituality: Communal and Ethical

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The American spiritual quest

The phrase "liturgical spirituality" must sound odd to many spiritual seekers. In late modern American culture, "liturgy" speaks of institutionalized religious ritual, while "spirituality" commonly means an experiential, even mystical, dimension of life that is deeply personal. Catholics and Episcopalians are liturgical, as are Lutherans, some Methodists, and even Presbyterians—despite reluctance based on Western church history. Liturgical churches are also the churches having a harder time maintaining the allegiance of their members, according to social scientific studies of American religion. If current predictions prove true, it will only get worse. "In the new millennium [the] individualized approach to religion will become more widespread as Americans seek inspiration from personal experience, rather than from doctrine handed-down through creed or religious hierarchies."[1] An opposition is enunciated by such researchers: personal experience is set against creeds and hierarchies as mediators of religious meaning. Nothing is said about the liturgical assembly in the American spirituality project.

What are Americans said to be looking for spiritually? One summary analysis of the religious marketplace says: "Americans are drawn to practical religion—to spiritual practices that not only connect them with the sacred, but fix things, from problems on the job to persistent arthritis."[2] Because creeds, doctrines, and hierarchies are not found to be practical, Americans in search of spirituality are inclined to minimize these. Instead they are mixing and matching traditional religious practices, drawing them from diverse religious contexts. In the name of spirituality, Americans are appropriating Gregorian chant, Slavonic chant, angels, Sufi dancing, Bible reading, Zen sitting, mantra intonations, aroma therapy, massage therapy, music therapy, the use of crystals and magnets, and keeping a solstice or secular sabbath. These are selected and ordered in eclectic combinations to effect some desired personal "difference." Because late modern culture is characteristically affluent, fewer people who are "shopping for faith" are seeking survival. The affluent are typically shopping for spiritual well-being, material well-being having already been achieved. Healing, wholeness, growth, connectedness, community, com-

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[1] Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 50.

[2] Cimino and Lattin, *Shopping for Faith,* 51.

munion, meaning—any and all of these words are used to name the desire for well-being in everyday life. "Spirituality" is being marketed as antidote to things not going well because of personal and social fragmentation. It is presented as achievable for those who work at it, using sacred practices old and new.

A brief apologia for magic as ordinary. From an academic perspective as well as a theological one, religion that "works" is magic. Preachers of the gospel of salvation in Christ have long had recourse to an anti-magic, anti-ritual trope within their rhetorical tool bags (Paul). But gospel or not, people continue to want religion that works. So, instead of taking up the condemnatory trope, it might be useful to reflect briefly on the ubiquity of the magico-religious impulse. Why does it persist?

To begin with, the world as experienced is frequently hostile to us. Humans have obvious interests in controlling hostile forces: eluding fate, getting invisible energies in favorable balance, bringing the spheres into harmony, banishing malevolent spirits, heading off disasters. So also we hope to create conditions necessary for welcoming favorable forces. The account of how our ninth-century Saxon forbears in the Weser valley in north central Germany first received the gospel in magico-religious terms is a wonderful tale of human imagination and insight put to the service of a mysterious disclosure of salvation in Christ. They caught the gospel the way they did—as a disclosure of powerful speaking, new runes more powerful than the runes of the old gods—because they were unable to hear it any other way. Such was their horizon of understanding, the limit beyond which they could not think or imagine.[3] The Saxons are not the exception. Cultures, earlier and more recent, have wanted religion as a gift that works for them. Indeed, as theologian Paul Lakeland observed of our human kind, within the known universe it is our distinctively human nature to organize the world—including ultimate mystery—around ourselves.[4]

The novelty: Going it alone spiritually. Within that larger frame, the longing for faith that works is not a peculiarly American problem. But there is something distinctively American in the current manifestation of the magico-religious impulse. The late modern quest for "spirituality" is a quest of individuals disconnected from traditional communities and institutions. The practices people are piling into their "spirituality" shopping baskets have no obligatory connection to stable communities and the shared meanings of such communities. The current interest in constructing personal spiritualities outside communities of interpretation is characteristically modern and enlightened. How long individual spiritualities so constructed from eclectic practices can last is uncertain, because self-authored spiritual "traditions" are unprecedented.[5] Traditional liturgical spirituality, in contrast to contemporary market-basket

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[3] *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel.* A translation and commentary by G. Ronald Murphy (New York: Oxford 1992); Mary Collins, "Evangelization, Catechesis, and the Beginning of Western Eucharistic Theology," *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998): 124–42.

[4] Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). See "Doxology, Yes: But Who is Our God?" (pp. 245–56 in this volume); see also Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge, 1999) for an extended essay on the intimate connection between the liturgical process and communal faith commitment.

[5] Catherine Bell, "Ritual, Change, and Changing Ritual," *Worship* 63 (1989): 31–41, provides a related discussion.

spiritualities, is intentionally communal and ethical.

Certainly people have always come to liturgical assemblies with dubious expectations, hoping that the liturgical rite would magically resolve the problems in their lives. Why would they not? People who frequent liturgical assemblies are fully human, with the innate human predilection for religion that works for them personally. Fortunately, life experience serves to discipline human illusions about religious magic. A more significant cultural problem confronts the church of the twenty-first century if commentators on American religion are correct. Western liturgical churches seem, to American sensibilities, to be primarily the province of hierarchies concerned with communicating doctrines and creeds, right orders and norms, something which reportedly leaves most younger Americans cold. For these people, liturgical worship does not "work." It yields nothing by way of "spirituality" understood as a sense of personal well-being. It not only leaves them with their problems, but it leaves them unmoved and even alienated as they face their problems.

The gap between liturgical tradition and current religious aspiration is a serious matter. Liturgical spirituality is intrinsically communal in its form and ethical in its intent. Reaching a better understanding of these two characteristics of liturgical spirituality is the goal in this essay.

Liturgical spirituality: Communal, corporate, corporeal

Liturgical spirituality is embodied Christian spirituality. It harbors nothing of the gnostic, contrasting sharply with the gnostic impulse to make "the spiritual" an orientation of the mind and emotions only. This statement needs exploration on three points.

The first body at issue is the social body that is the church, communities located in history in particular places and times. Liturgical spirituality is mediated corporately, through recognizable communities of the baptized gathered locally. The ELCA is such a corporate body, a community of interpretation formed through common commitments grounded by memories, shared experiences, shared symbols and practices—all of them pointing to the gospel of salvation in Christ.[6] Yes, this mediating body is an institution. But it is an institution with more at stake than hierarchies, doctrines, and creeds giving fuel to ideological contestations. As an institution the church is ultimately concerned to embody in human history the divine-human relationship revealed in Christ. In theological language, the church is the sacrament of the mystery of Christ, known in the living tradition as the mystery of the cross, the law of the cross, and the paschal mystery.[7] This church's liturgy aims to set out this horizon of existence as possibility for itself and for the unbelieving world. The liturgy aims to extend the limits of human meaning far beyond what would be humanly attractive from a self-referential standpoint. The liturgy draws its participants into the mystery by the simple strategy of embodying it together. Liturgical spirituality is mediated corporately.

This raises the second point. Corporate mediation of a mystery involves communal

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[6] James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), offers an extended discussion of this position.

[7] At Vatican Council II the Roman Catholic Church intentionally reappropriated the phrase "paschal mystery," a characteristic usage of the early Mediterranean church to conceptualize the mystery of Christ celebrated in the church's liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5, 6, 10.

bodily practice. The liturgical practices are not determined randomly or eclectically. Rather, the church mediates the horizon of meaning that is the mystery of Christ through its living tradition of orderly liturgical practices. A vast repertoire of vocalizations, music, spatial arrangements, postures, formulaic speech, stylized gestures, natural and cultural objects, symbolic actions and transactions have served as storehouse or treasury for the mystery; it continues to grow. Liturgical spirituality is communal spirituality enfleshed through the bodies of the many individual Christians who make up every local ecclesial body.

All manners of bodies are needed for this mediation—old bodies, young bodies, tired bodies, beautiful bodies, wounded and diseased bodies, bodies of the deceased and newborns. Whenever the church has taken its cues from cultural affinities, making "perfect" human bodies the vehicle for its disclosure of the mystery, the church has itself become deformed. Repeated communal liturgical practice, including the practice of liturgical preaching, imprints more and more deeply in the bodies and minds of the baptized the patterns of relationship that are the way of the world's salvation.

A third point complements the first two. What the church embodies in its liturgical assemblies is the interiority of the church, the inner mystery by which it exists at all. This identifying interiority is the holy Spirit of Christ Jesus, the gift that created the church at Pentecost. By contrast with the individually constructed late modern spiritualities which the students of American religion have described, liturgical spirituality is not an affirmation of the cultural self. Liturgical spirituality is a spirituality of people dispersed across the earth who have been called to baptism, who are learning to call themselves the Body of Christ, who are working to put on the mind of Christ, and who mean to live by the power of his Spirit. It is a spirituality at odds with personal achievement. To speak theologically, liturgical spirituality is grace, a gift mediated through the body.

Traditional liturgical spirituality, in contrast to contemporary market-basket spiritualities, is intentionally communal and ethical.

Two liturgical practices—one traditionally Jewish, the other Christian—can be explored briefly to see how the liturgically exercised body is exercised intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively, while being directed toward the ethical.

The practice of binding. In orthodox Judaism, tying on phylacteries is one moment in the larger symbolic process of obligatory daily prayer for men. The leather boxes attached to the forehead and the left biceps contain tiny scrolls on which is written the Shema, a creedal text also vocalized during the daily prayer and recognized as summary of the whole Torah.[8] The orthodox ritual practice of tying affirms meanings that are not found in the text itself. The text names a living relationship with God, but the qualities are better embodied than named. Daily prayer begins with embodiment.

[8] "Tefillin" in Richard Siegel et al., *The Jewish Catalog* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 58–63.

One leather box is tied on the forehead; the second is intricately bound onto the left arm. The ritual strategy of binding captures the mystery of the divine-human relationship as that relationship was experienced and interpreted many generations earlier through the prophets Miriam and Moses. The mystery was this: freedom from bondage to pharaoh is achieved through a binding relationship with the God of Sinai. This relationship is poorly understood and so misunderstood if it is reduced to obligation alone. Bondage to pharaoh was coerced; God's relationship with Israel was initiated and is sustained through love.[9] Prior to duty, and its foundation, is love. The phylactery nearest the heart is secured with thongs brought down the arm to the ring finger and circled there three times. The image is of the nuptial tie—binding, yes, and also freeing.

How can a relationship that is binding also be freeing? This is a philosophical question, one not easily grasped intellectually. Interestingly, the twentieth century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, a man shaped by this ancient Jewish tradition of covenant meaning, has centered his philosophical reflection on the mystery of the relationship with the unexpected Other. One of Levinas's commentators summarizes his viewpoint thus: "The human self is indebted to and always in debt to the Other, who, by the graciousness and gratuity of his or her approach, summons me beyond the confines of my *self* to a life graced with possibilities beyond my own power and capacity."[10] Such a relationship with what is and remains beyond me is admittedly an "impossible relationship"—impossible because it requires letting go of the self to (re)discover oneself as *responsible*. Recurrent encounters with the gift of the Other—encounters that "call my power and my very possibility into question"—turn the self toward the infinitely and absolutely Other named by the vocalization "God." *Responsibility* for Levinas, according to his commentators, means being open to "wounding and outrage" through vulnerability to the Other. It involves vulnerability "even to the point of annihilation of the self."

The philosopher grapples to come to terms with what it means to be human and then writes and lectures on the humanly unthinkable cost of being open to the claim of Other. Only a few people will comprehend his question, grasp his abstract analysis of experience, and recognize and embrace as their own truth the notion that to be human is to be implicated ethically. A communal public practice—the daily binding of the phylacteries before reading Torah and praying the daily prayers—predisposed countless numbers of men to grasp the mystery of the Other who has given Torah as the way to authentic humanity. The liturgical practice cued them preconsciously but very personally. It drilled them in a hermeneutic, a way of interpreting their own lives. Perhaps it disposed Levinas himself, who spent time in the Nazi death camps, to formulate the philosophical problem behind "the wounding and outrage" of twentieth-century injustice and inhumanity. A liturgical practice such as this can point to a whole world of meaning alive in the common memory of a believing people, only part of which will actually be consciously available to ritualizers at any time. But the practice accomplishes this only in its communal context.

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[9] Exodus 19:3–5. The image is extended and sustained as the motif of Hosea's prophecy of God's unrequited love for Israel; Hos 2:21–25.

[10] Michael Purcell, *Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner and Levinas* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 222–23; also 249, n. 4.; cf. 95.

Marking the body with the cross. Consider a second shared world of meaning mediated through embodiment. One winter Sunday, five persons were called forward in the course of the eucharistic liturgy. Two were adults; three were boys who looked no more than fourteen or fifteen years. Their decision to move toward baptism, confirmation, and first communion was being marked in the Sunday assembly. Preliminary dialogue was exchanged. Then, as the official liturgical book directed, their bodies were marked. The marking was physical, flesh on flesh. The mark was the sign of the cross. The Roman Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults provides for ritual excess at this point, an uncommon form of western liturgical practice even among Catholics in the late twentieth century, for we are in a period when the directive to eliminate all "useless repetition"[11] is commonly interpreted to require omitting any repetition at all. So the willingness of the presiding priest and deacon in favor of extravagant liturgical action cannot be considered typically Catholic in the late modern American mode.

The boys had caught my attention. Three adolescent males—one African-American, one Hispanic, one Caucasian—let themselves be seen and touched by the adult church. They were touched liturgically and so touched physically and personally. The cross was traced first on each forehead. Then on their eyes, on their ears, on their mouths. Then their hearts, their shoulders, their hands, and even their feet were marked by the tracing of a cross. Formulaic words of blessing were spoken, but the touching was what resounded.

This marking on their bodies happened in the context of the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist, a context which points unwaveringly to the Jesus story and the Christ event. A massive cross, with Christ suspended, hung over the place they stood; it was directly visible to the assembly if not to them. The altar table to which the action would shift momentarily was behind them. In the pause structured by the methodical marking, most of the assembly was doing its own interior work—reestablishing identity and making meaning—although neither creeds nor doctrines had engaged us, but a bold act. The boys' presence to us and ours to them in this setting spoke of multiple relationships of promise, responsibility, and trust to the point of danger in a world already experienced as dangerous by the young. We had all been active in this liturgy before, hearing promises and making them.

What did the young men themselves understand this action to mean? That is hard to say, although it is clear that they had exposed their vulnerability in an uncommon act of trust. It is clearer what the church intended for them. The liturgy directed them to a norm for life beyond themselves—a self-transcendent, ethically focused norm. They were put into relationship with Christ Jesus as the way, the truth, the life, and with Christ's church. This was the relationship dramatically expressed in the church's cruciform marking of their bodies.[12] The act of marking was intentionally set after the proclamation of the Word and in anticipation of its eucharistic action. Such a liturgical location itself indicated that the church exists within and by relationship with the Triune God revealed through Christ—a relationship expressed

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[11] *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #34; Roman Catholic *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (1974), "Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens," #54–57.

[12] See Tom Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), for a discussion of ways popular culture uses the cross to attack institutional religion, even appropriating it as a fashion accessory; 52–53; 60–61; 71–72.

through the biblical notions of justice and mercy. As with Jewish orthodoxy's tying on of phylacteries, these young men were being faced with an Other in an "impossible relationship" that would require selflessness to sustain.

The apparently dry-as-dust creeds and doctrines hovering silently in the institutional environment of the liturgical celebration served to thematize complex dimensions of the relationship with and the identity of the Other. Not invoked on that particular occasion, but to be found bound within the pages of the church's liturgical books, creeds and doctrines are always functioning in the community at least as negative criteria for identifying what is not credible or trustworthy as the faith of the church. While only part of the church's *official* self-understanding was made *publicly* available in this particular liturgical action, the whole ordered world of meaning, ways of living, responsibilities and commitments that is the Catholic church were tacitly present in the event of the bodily marking. Neither the boys' personal feelings and opinions nor those of the Sunday assembly's members were the focus of the liturgy. Still, what was personal and private, the complex interiority of the local church—the mix of its faith, its questions, and its unbelief that was not given corporate public expression—was also part of the ecclesial meaning-making that is going on in every liturgical event.

The community that called the young men had members from Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Guatemala, Salvador, Haiti, Grenada, Russia, Poland, Vietnam, India, and a host of other points as well as from urban and suburban America. Their collective experience of life in Christ pointed to myriad ways of bearing the cross in one's body. It was this people's ecclesial life in the Spirit of Jesus that validated the liturgical action. That life was borne in their bodies and in their memories, anchored in their understandings through snatches of song, images and icons from other times and places, and phrases remembered from creeds and sermons, biblical readings and catechisms. The deliberate pace of the ritual—marking crosses on heads, torsos, and limbs in a very public setting—gave the assembly time and context to attend to its own mystery. With them, through them, on their flesh, in the persons of young men, the Body of Christ was affirming and confirming its own faith. Liturgy is communal, for the faith of the church is the faith of a people. But it is not thereby antithetical to personal experience, as the members of the parish just described would attest. Its difference lies elsewhere, namely in the readiness of the baptized to trust the Holy Spirit moving in the church as norm for their lives.

To have introduced the matter of norm for the good life is to come to the matter of liturgical spirituality as intrinsically ethical.

Liturgical spirituality as ethically oriented

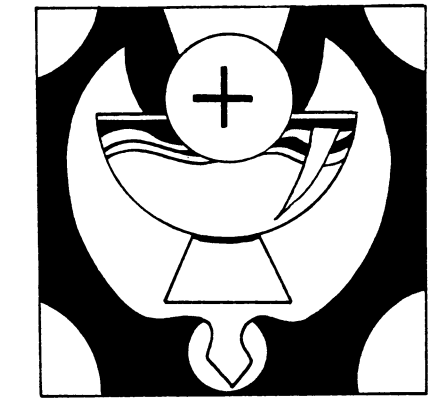
If liturgical spirituality is communal—the spirituality of the Christian body—liturgical spirituality is also ethical in its orientation. It is social spirituality that mediates responsibility in all the relationships celebrated in the course of the church's liturgy. Responsibilities are often discerned only slowly and accepted reluctantly. Sometimes the traditional wisdom of the whole ecclesial body communicates timeless obligations on every local community. At other times there can be profound disagreement within the ecclesial body about what the relationships celebrated liturgically require in social behavior in particular cultural circumstances. So even the ancient lists of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, themselves a distillation of gospel teaching, need

interpretation to translate into concrete acts of justice: what is required here and now to feed the hungry or to comfort the sorrowful neighbor? In fact, who is my neighbor in the global village that is the home of the church catholic? What are authentic ways to turn principles into responsible ethical behaviors? Church communities must have structures for discernment beyond but never disconnected from their liturgical celebrations.

While liturgical action does not substitute for responsible social behavior, liturgical celebration can generate ethical insight through liturgical embodiment. The very composition of the liturgical assembly which dared to mark newcomers with the sign of the cross was, through that formal process, learning to welcome the Other in an "impossible relationship." Left to their own choice, most participants would have preferred Sunday worship and church life in a community of "their own kind," the kind everyone knew before immigration disrupted their life worlds. Yet they had accepted the choice available to them: to open themselves to strangers in their neighborhood and become companions with them in Christ. Every liturgical action, starting with the act of assembling, is intimately connected with and points toward the sacrament of the altar, the ultimate sacrament of the dispensability of the human self in response to an other.

Liturgical framing of responsibility. Here is a true story. A 6 year-old boy, Christian by name, beckoned the teacher right during music class. They were learning a song for a school liturgy. "Sister," he whispered, "I have to tell you something." She leaned down. He confided, "Don't ever say 'blood' around me. It scares me!"

The church's eucharistic liturgy tries to stay quiet about blood in deference to the Christians, but blood is always present in



the background. Even in the case of the sign of the cross, the Christian's community's radical ethical imperative, the blood has historically been muted. Mediterranean Christians of the imperial epoch gilded and bejeweled the cruel cross and then set it high in the dome above the assembled church. Beautiful mosaics depicting the sacrifice of Isaac as key to understanding the bloody death of Jesus glittered in candlelight and sunlight; beauty distracted the viewer from attention to danger. The images kept whole the mystery of the divine-human relationship revealed in the story of Jesus, but the luminous images pushed the pain below consciousness. When Gothic and Baroque Christians dared to magnify the images of pain, at times giving cruciform shape to the very buildings in which they gathered, they too ingeniously contained the terror of the blood. Cruciform churches gave them a self-protective understanding of how the cross was *their shelter.* Many modern churches—suspicious of, perhaps even hostile to, what might be idolatrous or merely decorative—are visually lean liturgical environments. But the absence of Christian religious images in an otherwise rich iconic culture can be confusing, too. Good respectable people who are

Every liturgical action is intimately connected with and points toward the sacrament of the altar.

doing well by cultural norms risk becoming solipsistic points of reference for the church, mistaking their own ways for God's ways. Theologically understood, the liturgical assembly is indeed a sacrament of salvation, but only because worshipers are being formed in relation to meaning beyond themselves. Being formed in the mind of Christ, they live toward an Other, a relationship that promises to draw life blood—theirs—sooner or later.

Traditional liturgical words of invitation to the eucharistic table have also muted the voice of the blood. But here too strategic concealment of what is difficult to bear is never denial. In the Byzantine liturgy, the sacramental bread to be consumed is evocatively named "The Lamb," an image with biblical references to blood shed for the life of others. But the words spoken to summon the church to the eucharistic table—"Holy Things for Holy People"—are intentionally words of encouragement and consolation. The blood of the Lamb is unspoken. In the Roman liturgy the invitation is "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" and continues immediately, "Happy are we who are called to his supper." Notice the forward rapid movement through the pain. The Lamb is slain. The sins of the world are gone. The church is a holy and happy people. What is brought to conscious attention in this liturgical action is indeed a comforting summary of the faith of the church. But all the muted signals of ethical responsibility are there, just out of sight and out of the church's hearing at the moment of invitation to communion. For where has there ever been a Christian people who has *not* prayed, "Don't ever say 'blood' around me. It scares me."

As an exercise to test how the ethical orientation of liturgy is strategically framed, I propose imagining alternate liturgical dialogues for the moment during the eucharistic liturgy when the church is invited to come forward to the altar table. Centonization—the patching together of extant texts to make a new text—is an literary device long used for the creation of liturgical dialogues.[13] I put the device to use to form communion invitations that would bring us closer to the radical truth of the ethical responsibility latent in Christian identity. Consider one alternative dialogue:

Deacon: "Holy things for holy people!"

People: "When we have eaten, we shall die." (Cf. 1 Kgs 17:12)

The abrupt acknowledgment that death will be a consequence of communing in the mystery of Christ is enough to make ordinary humans hesitate about accepting the invitation.

So consider a second centonized dialogue, one that openly sanctions a refusal of the invitation to communion:

Deacon: "Can you drink the cup I shall drink or be baptized in the same bath of pain as I?" (Cf. Mark 10:19)

People: "How does this concern of yours involve me? My hour has not yet come." (Cf. John 2:4)

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[13] See George Guiver. *Company of Voices* (New York: Pueblo, 1988), 169-70.

As a third possibility for the same moment of liturgical exchange, the deacon might ask the same question—"Can you drink . . . ?" and the presiding minister or lay leader might confess in response:

"The invited are many, the elect are few" (cf. Matt 22:14).

If these dialogues strike readers as liturgical "misfires," it is because Christians who participate regularly in liturgical events recognize preconsciously that the more authentic liturgical strategy involves a measure of concealment.[14] These exchanges are too raw for ordinary churchgoers, those who are unready to get too close to the mystery of Christ prematurely, but who nevertheless "want to stay in touch."[15]

On concealing and uncovering the mystery of faith. The common cup of the new covenant is an ethically charged symbol muted in every liturgical tradition, but not for reasons of avoidance. Rather, liturgical traditions operate with tacit awareness that corporate liturgical practice is the human foundation for understanding the demand of faith.[16] One might even think of liturgical concealment as co-conspiracy between the church and its ministers authorized by the Holy Spirit in the church! Otherwise, what are we to make of standard liturgical practices? While communing in the eucharistic cup has recently been restored to the Catholic people, it is officially presented as an optional part of the communion rite. In many Reformation churches custom provides that Holy Communion is taken only occasionally, and the form of individual communion cups diminishes any dangerous social insight it might press upon the communing body or its pastors. In the Orthodox church, the communion cup's muting has long been accomplished by its transposition to a dip for holy bread.

To make these ironic observations is not to disparage present practice but to acknowledge the hidden wisdom of concealment that is part of all liturgical traditions. To share the cup of the new covenant in Christ with full consciousness of the personal consequences of the divine-human relationship it expresses involves spiritual endangerment. The assault on human commitment to self-preservation is reason enough to resist the gospel of salvation and its claim to be good tidings. To share the cup without building confidence through the steady witness of the believing community that this gift of salvation is to be trusted is to ask communicants to agree to a "truly impossible relationship." Liturgical practice frames the truth—but also buffers it.

Accordingly liturgical spirituality, the spiritual horizon set out by the liturgical celebrations of the church, expresses the truth of the mystery of life in Christ, but it does so ambiguously, always allowing for partial concealment of the full cost of responding until the worshipers' hour is "come." The paradox is that the divine summons comes insistently through the human Other, as the Jesus story says so clearly. To be ready for disclosure in its fullness, the church celebrates liturgically with great regularity the many dimensions of its identity. It also tries to live faithfully with the measure of insight into the mystery of discipleship it has achieved. Concurrently, the church's preachers and theolo-

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[14] See Ronald Grimes, "Infelicitous Performance and Ritual Criticism," in *Ritual Criticism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 204.

[15] Monica Furlong, *Contemplating Now,* cited in "Doxology, Yes," first essay in this series, p. 246 n. 1.

[16] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge, 1999). The author writes not as a theologian but as a cultural anthropologist, arguing that liturgical events are the *sine qua non* of faith communities.

gians are charged to explain more fully the relationship which is salvation in Christ and so to augment week by week whatever measure of insight the church has about for *whom*, for *what*, and *how* believers are responsible.

My main argument in this discussion of liturgical spirituality is that the Holy Spirit in the church opens up by every means possible the mystery revealed in Christ. Overmuch preoccupation with hierarchical ordering and overmuch confidence in the powers of human reason can deceive the church into thinking that every significant spiritual insight will come through the head. Not so. The church's liturgical action is a traditional means of grace, so designed that spiritual insight into the mystery of Christ breaks through wherever it can. Connections are made in the memory, the imagination, the emotions, the intellect—always mediated through physical bodies. The church's tradition of liturgical spirituality recognizes that even the blood rushing silently in our veins and occasionally gushing from our bodies is a pathway to the mystery.

Liturgical spirituality for a new generation

Anyone reflecting with Reformation sensibilities may be entertaining interior resistance to a paean to liturgical practice as key to Christian identity and spirituality. Isn't promoting the non-rational aspects of the liturgy an encouragement of ecclesial regression—pushing modern people back to the Dark Ages or laterally into the New Age? Wasn't the Reformation's achievement to move from the non-rational believing to reasoned, conscious appropriation of the gospel message? Admittedly my religious sensibilities are Catholic, and the Catholic tradition has risked dangerous entanglement with the non-rational in worship for the sake of the gospel—and borne just criticism for errors in judgment from other Christian communions. Yet the Reformation corrective occurred at the time of a larger cultural shift toward reason that led eventually beyond the reasoned appropriation of the faith to rationalism and then toward the resistance movements of fideism and pietism. Even in the work of church reform the church is unavoidably engaged with human cultures.

Whatever the genuine theological debates, the world of the sixteenth-century reformers was a world in cultural transition. The printing press was a cultural vehicle for the promotion of a linear view of reality. Furthermore, the new dominance of vernacular languages in public life required that the church's Scripture, too, be publicly accessible to an increasingly literate society. In retrospect, it is possible to see how the emergence of critical reason propelled the "higher" church toward greater clarity and less symbolic ambiguity about the demands of the gospel. Creeds and doctrines and sermons interpreting inspired writings became touchstones for authentic Christian identity. Even the not-so-high churches redirected the old religious passions toward the Word, but took it beyond printed texts to its manifestations in tongues.

Now the cultural tide is turning again, and unthematized and undisciplined American religious sensibilities are searching for overt form outside the Christian churches. Will the churches in North America be resourceless to extending themselves beyond text-oriented worship and linear exposition of the gospel? Can the churches recapture and rechannel the religious impulses of both the baptized and the unchurched and keep them directed toward Christ using the abundant resources of its liturgical traditions? Can the churches help late modern

people make the connections and find the meanings they report are missing in their lives? Can the desired linking of people's lives to compelling meaning beyond themselves be effected through the identifying practices central to liturgical spirituality? Are churches ready to embrace once again the body corporate and corporeal and the iconic imagination as graced means toward Christian identity and readiness for mission? Can the Word be proclaimed in worship in less rational and orderly ways that are nonetheless traditional insofar as they express the apostolic faith for, yes, a new age?

Consider the dynamics of the new cultural situation. For a century now film makers, jazz musicians, concert organizers, protest organizers, and most recently web masters, rising up from within this rational, well-ordered culture, have been pressing society towards alternate forms of experiencing and communicating the life world. Film makers do their work by setting out a rapid flow of images, disconnected and out of sequence. Over the images flows a sound track with snatches of conversation, musical sequences, and environmental sounds. The arrangement challenges the viewers to make a whole of the bits and pieces given, and viewers have become increasingly skilled at recognizing connections and making them. When the film makers do their work skillfully, meaning in a way that works their viewers without working them beyond their imaginative capacity, critics give them four stars or two thumbs up. Jazz musicians break out from a score or a melody to improvise on a musical phrase, testing the limits of sonic and rhythmic possibilities, pulling listeners into the unprecedented with their virtuosity. Demonstration and concert organizers transform individuals into interacting participants whose presence is itself central to the event. Web masters pull isolated individuals into their iconic domains so designed that they move browsers into web rings linked iconically by nonsequential connections—some intuitive, some logical in their ordering, but none of them ordered to the ultimate meaning that is the mystery of Christ.[17] In this, of course, lies the challenge for the churches who are also in the work of "meaning making," and see it as a matter of life and death.[18]

Can the churches help late modern people make the connections and find the meanings they report are missing in their lives?

Is it too odd to suggest that this century of jazz, film, iconic web rings, and participatory events has been predisposing spiritually disoriented late modern people toward retrieval of Christian liturgical spirituality? I am not suggesting a perfect match between Christian faith and available cultural worlds. To the contrary. Nor am I suggesting raw imitation of cultural organizers, for the church of Christ has its own

[17] Church web pages give the churches public status in the Internet world—holding open a place in the market—but the effects of a church's Internet identity is distinct from the church's ecclesial identity celebrated in its worship in public assembly.

[18] "Postmodern ritualizing runs the risk of becoming religious entertainment, but this is no worse than modern ritual's having risked the identification of ritual with work and success." Grimes, *Ritual Criticism*, 27.

traditional means in its heritage of liturgical worship. But there are significant points of convergence between the dynamism of the Christian liturgical tradition and the cultural quest for a spirituality that touches people personally and connects them in a disconnected society to something beyond themselves. Liturgy well-celebrated sets out a spiritual horizon that connects churchgoers to reality toward which they are responsible, making meaningful connections through the discipline of regular corporate spiritual practices. So also there is a serendipitous correspondence between the nonlinear forms of cultural communication and the strategies of liturgical meaning making. Both depend upon the evocative power of nondiscursive ritual processes to stimulate memory, imagination, and intellect. Liturgy uses such means to lead people to recognize the mystery of Christ present in their own and other human experiences needing interpretation before they can be responded to adequately. Can these affinities draw people beyond the narrowed aspiration of a culturally sanctioned life of self-interest? Will revitalized Christian liturgical celebration be embraced fully by the churches as traditional means through which the Holy Spirit can draw spiritually hungry late modern Americans to trust life in Christ as the way of salvation?

I am not arguing for mere "traditionalizing" of what happens in church. Liturgical traditionalizing freezes past behaviors and insights—those of Lutherans in Germany, in Sweden, or on the American frontier, or Catholics in sixth-century Rome—so that the church's past dominates the present. Such traditionalizing is, of course, a possible ritual strategy.[19] But mere imitation of the practices of earlier generations of believers carries the implicit judgment that Christians of another time and place have a normative claim against which present experiences of the church must be tested for authenticity. Liturgical traditionalizing through exact duplication of the past is a no-confidence vote in the living community of believers. Furthermore, traditionalizing as imitation has its own dangers, for alongside its interest in transcendence, the church which takes its identity from the mystery of the Incarnation has always been planted squarely in particular places and times.

Concluding observation concerning liturgical spirituality. A true understanding of Christian liturgical practice starts with the recognition that the constant in liturgical spirituality is not a well-preserved past but the living relationship of salvation revealed in Christ. It is this relationship that is carried forward in the life and common memory of the believing community. The relationship that Christian liturgy celebrates has a two thousand-year history, and the richness of that history deserves to be honored in celebrations in the present. But neither Lutheran nor Catholic historical memories ought to control the living community of believers facing new cultural challenges to their belief in the gospel. Churches must certainly cherish the wisdom of its traditions of liturgical spirituality, lest it lose sight of the living relationship that has brought the church to a new millennium. Yet there are new manifestations of God's stirring of human hearts, and these are calling the churches to risk facing the challenge of that "impossible relationship" with the Other uncovered in the mystery of Christ. These new concerns—at once cosmic and global in their scope—must find expression in the living church's liturgical celebration of its living faith as the church, too, continues to learn how it is responsible.

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[19] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 118–24.

Worship in the Twenty-first Century: Contextually Relevant and Catholic— 1. Assembly

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Why gather for worship in the present time?

Consider one important but little noticed biblical image, savoring it for a bit: In Nehemiah 8, the people who have returned from the exile are pictured as having gathered in a great assembly. It is all of the people, from all the towns, "men and women and all who could hear with understanding" (8:2). They are gathered in a square before a gate in the newly restored wall of Jerusalem, the gate that presumably opens from the city toward a water-source, the Water Gate. They ask Ezra to bring the book of the *torah*, and he does. Then, on a great wooden platform in their midst—a *migdal* in Hebrew, a *bema*, the Greek of the Septuagint says—he opens the book. The people all stand; Ezra blesses God; the people cry out, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands in praise and bowing down in adoration; and Ezra reads to them. From early morning until midday, he reads to them. He reads, and the Levites—scattered among them, perhaps, or taking turns on the *bema*—give the interpretation of the text. The people, long separated from this word, longing for it, troubled by it, begin to mourn and weep. Ezra says:

> "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." (Neh 8:10)

And the assembly ends in just this way:

> And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (8:12)

This image of *assembly*—even in its details—evokes for us other biblical assemblies. At least two come to mind, both of them from primary and framing moments in the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. So, first of all, the people assemble at the foot of Sinai (Exodus 19–24). This is that very people which is to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:6). Here, again, or

first of all, is the *torah*: from Moses they hear the very words of God. And then the meal: they enter into the covenant, and in their representatives, accompanying Moses on the mountain, they behold God and—far from being struck dead—they eat and drink (24:11).

Then, in the promises of the prophetic literature (e.g., Isaiah 2 and 25), all the nations are to be invited to such an assembly. The word of God, the *torah*, the holy instruction, will be sounded from "the mountain of the LORD's house" (Isa 2:2), to a gathering from all over the world. And the life-giving, comfort-giving meal will be there as well:

> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.... The LORD will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples...wiping away the tears from all faces. (25:6-8)

Like the assembly at the Water Gate, these imaged gatherings—at the beginning of the vocation of Israel and at the end of time—have their center in the voice or word of God and their culmination in a shared and life-giving meal in which God is the primary host or source of strength. And if the people of Nehemiah's meeting pass through the desert from exile to come through the Water Gate to the square around the *bema*, then these other meetings are also constituted by great transitional journeys, the first people having passed through the sea, the final assembly made up as "all the nations stream" to God's mountain (Isa 2:2).

In one place or another in the Scriptures, all three of these gatherings are called by the same name: *qahal* or, in the Greek, *ekklesia*, "the meeting," "the assembly."[1] Unfolded by these stories, the name now evokes in me—perhaps also in you—a longing to sometime see such a meeting, hear its word, taste its food. "Assembly," like many of the full-bodied images of the Hebrew Scriptures, calls forth a strong response in us. Indeed, "assembly," described in such a way, is a "deep symbol"[2] in many of our cultures and consciousnesses, though probably also one that is endangered and effaced. I know I read the stories as a Christian, but the parallels between these various biblical assemblies are there in the texts, and the power of the images does call up a modern longing.

In any case, that name—*ekklesia*, "the assembly"—has a further history. It is the name that the early Christian communities called themselves, the name we conventionally and somewhat opaquely translate as "church." These communities were, rather—to translate a little more clearly—"the assembly in the house of Nympha" (Col 4:16) and "the meeting of God that is in Corinth" (1 Cor 1:1) and "all the assemblies of the Gentiles" (Rom 16:4) and even, somehow, considered as a whole, "the gathering of God" (Gal 1:13) throughout the world.[3] It is quite possible that this early Christian name was intended to evoke the Hebrew scriptural "assembly," and not just to function as a Christian use of the antique Hellenic term for the voters' gathering of all the free males in a Greek city. The remarkable description of a Christian gathering in Heb 12:18-24 suggests as much. So does the famous application to a Christian gathering of the Sinai imagery for the assembled people: "you are a chosen race, a royal

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[1] For example, Deut 18:16; Neh 8:2; Heb 12:23. On *qahal* as an important symbol to the twentieth century liturgical movement, see Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1955), 23-37.

[2] Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996).

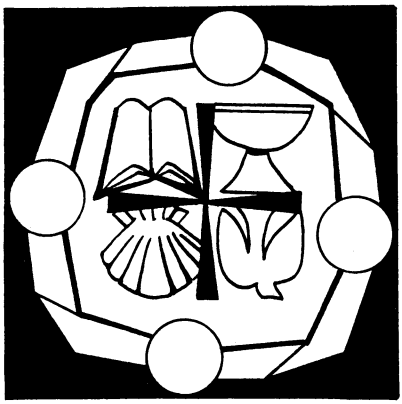
[3] See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale, 1983), 108-9.

priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," says 1 Peter (2:9).[4]

Only in early Christian use there was a difference. The deep symbol was reoriented, broken to a new purpose. The gathering now was not at Sinai nor at Jerusalem—"neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem," the Johannine Jesus says (John 4:21)—but in every local place where at least a few people gathered, usually in houses slowly being transformed for this purpose.[5] And the gathering was no longer an ideal image, occupying a place in inexpressible hope or ancient myth. Rather, the *ekklesia* was real folk, here, now. Like the Isaian image, according to this early Christian linguistic use, the nations were indeed beginning to stream together to hear God's word. Like all three biblical assemblies, the Scriptures were read in these meetings and interpreted. The word of God gave the meeting a center. And a meal was held. At least, that is the case when we can begin to discern the contents of the Christian meeting, in Luke 24 and Acts 20, for example, or later in the writings of Justin. And, if we can believe Paul (1 Cor 16:2) and then Justin, portions were also being sent to "those for whom nothing is prepared":

> Those who are prosperous and who desire to do so, give what they wish, according to each one's own choice, and the collection is deposited with the presider. He aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through disease or through another cause, those who are in prison, and foreigners who are sojourning here.[6]

But this end-time assembly had a radically new content. One way to say it is this: In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the nations are being gathered. The last day of God has begun. The assembly of God, celebrating the new exodus, the new return from exile for all the earth, is already now



gathering the nations wherever the word and meal which bear witness to the life-giving meaning of Jesus' death are taking place. The Scriptures are read with his death in mind, and his resurrection has become the content of the "instruction" going out to the nations. The Triune God is present in the reading and the preaching, just as God was present in the text read at the Water Gate, in the Voice at Sinai, in the word going forth from Zion at the end. And God is the host of the meal, setting out rich food for the poor by the power of the Spirit. These gatherings are about the meaning of the world before God, in God's judgment, under God's mercy. Their participants are just folks, marked with many of the signs of mortality and sin, of local inequities and

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[4] For a further discussion of the primitive Christian use of "assembly" as symbol, see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 29-43.

[5] L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990).

[6] Justin, *1 Apology* 67. See my second lecture in this series, "Ordo," p. 298 in this volume.

local needs. But the word and meal at the center of the gathering promise justice and the end of tears. The food and money and words that are then sent into the streets bear witness to the dawning presence of that promise. And there is even a way to come into this meeting, to become part of the assembly-before-God. Baptism, its communal process and its water, evoke the passage through the sea and through the desert, the nations now streaming through the Water Gate.

Can we leap from that early time to this? Try this:

These things are *catholic*: a local assembly of people, constituted by baptism, participating together in that word and meal which, by the power of the Spirit, draw them into God's intention for all the world in Jesus Christ, in communion with other such assemblies in other places, inheriting the ancient Christian use of the assembly-image of the Scriptures. By this conception, each assembly in each place is the catholic *ekklesia*, as it stays centered in these things. Locality—particularity—belongs to the essence of this catholicity. The catholic church is not a massive institution with a powerful central headquarters. Nor is it an ideal reality, somewhere else. It is always a local meeting, local people using local language, locally prepared food, local water-sources. But it is always a local meeting gathered before and enlivened by the one God. Its words, food, water are used with biblical and Christian eschatological intent.

And, if it is indeed the assembly of God, it will seek to send and receive signs of its communion with the other assemblies.[7] It will break open any tendency to let locality turn in upon itself. Indeed, patterns and books for the local use of words and meal and bath anciently circulated as signs of communion between assemblies. The very collection of biblical books itself was first of all such a sign of communion. Then the churches have exercised further such signs: mutual affirmation and admonition in the use of these central things according to the deep intention of the meeting (church orders and creeds and conciliar decisions, being forms of such affirmation and admonition) and mutual recognition of the persons who lead (the slow development of diverse patterns of ministry being rooted in a search for such recognition). But note: church, catholic church, is always *assembly*. The Bible is a book for the assembly. Bishops are local presiders in an assembly or, later, visitors in many assemblies, calling for the wider communion of assemblies.

Of course, I have made these assertions about what is catholic by a kind of "sorting." These are my assertions, made in the midst of present need, on the edge of the twenty-first century, and made, I hope, with informed awareness of history and an evangelical turn to present times. But Edward Farley is right. The reclamation of deep symbols among us, "tradition" and "catholicity" among them, will be enabled by "centering, sorting and embodiment,"[8] although in this case lectures can only contribute to the centering and sorting. The embodiment will rest on what assemblies in our time actually do. In any case, we can set aside such parodies of "catholicity" as the nineteenth-century romantic dreams of the middle ages or the current refusal of the weekly meal as being "too catholic." I think we probably ought to set aside the "canon" of Vincent of Lerins, as well: that is catholic, he said, which was believed everywhere, always and by everyone. I wonder if such universal belief can ever be established. I am much more confident with the

[7] Lathrop, *Holy People*, 49-71.
[8] Farley, *Deep Symbols*, 39.

more modest proposal of Prosper of Aquitane: the rule of beseeching—the urging of the apostle (in 1 Tim 2:1) that prayers should be made for everyone and the widespread response of the churches in actually doing that—establishes the rule of believing: the catholic faith is that everyone needs God and God's grace;[9] the catholic practice is to make that witness, to hold an open assembly, to pray—in the assembly—for everyone, and to welcome as many as will come to the assembly's signs of God's grace. Then, "catholic" is not so much a name for what is actually everywhere but for a simple practice that ought to be everywhere, that is indeed always struggling to come to expression everywhere.

So we sort. We do so like other people in the history of the church who have sorted—Luther, for example—"holding fast to what is good."[10] Is *assembly* good? The catholic assembly is a participating people gathered around word, table, and bath as a way to be immersed in the very presence of God. Shall we do that? Why should we do that? Is assembly really necessary for us to be Christian? Is it a useful thing to our actual common life in the present time? Does it not seem rather like an odd remnant from other cultural times, a longing vaguely awakened by old stories?

These somewhat jarring questions, of course, arise from our context. But, paradoxically, if the catholic assembly is always local, then we always need to take our context into serious consideration, even if that context raises questions about assembly itself. So what can we say about our context that may illuminate why assembly may indeed be a deep symbol for us, a symbol worthy of recovery, while it may also be a threatened or effaced symbol?

The libraries are full of books—and the Internet is full of "postings"—which mean to thoroughly examine our postmodern context. While these lectures cannot review all of these analyses, one major social study we should recall proposes that North America currently suffers from a serious decline in "social capital."[11] That is to say, our common life is marked by a lessening and deterioration of those public and communal institutions where we mix with a wide company of people—people other than close family or fellow employees—building trust, conversing, volunteering, creating civic networks. It is not simply mainline church attendance that has suffered reverses; so have PTAs and book clubs and bowling leagues! We still bowl, for example, but we bowl alone, not in leagues. The study, called, in fact, "Bowling Alone," offers a variety of possible reasons for this decline: weariness with public engagement and

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[9] *Ut legem credendi, lex statuat supplicandi* is the dictum taken from Prosper, PL 51:209. See further in the forthcoming paper on Prosper's dictum by Michael Church in *Worship*.

[10] So Luther quotes 1 Thess 5:21 as a principle for liturgical sorting in his *Formula Missae et Communionis*, WA 12:208.

[11] Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 65-78.

public hope at the end of a century of horrors; the astronomical increase in the salaried employment of women, who had been the traditional backbone of much voluntarism; the general shift to an ethic of self-realization and entertainment. But, finally, the scholarship of "Bowling Alone" points to one major source of this decline: the presence of "virtual community" in our living rooms and on our computer screens. The sense of engagement with others has become available to us through laugh tracks, "you are there" sporting events, the personable pitches of shopping channels, the preachers saying, "God loves you and so do I," the chat rooms, even the exchange of virtual identities. And this engagement does not require commitment. It does not even require leaving the place of our own glowing screens. We soar into the crowded virtual population of cyberspace, but we seem to leave our own sad flesh, and its actual networks of connection, behind.

I do not wish, at this point, to join the ranks of the technophobes. The television screen, the multiplication of cable channels, and the Internet are *tools*—not unlike the telephone or the radio, perhaps even like the camera and the printing press—and they can, indisputably, be used for the well-being of our commonwealth. The very proliferation of options they enable may be linked to the classic American values of democracy and individualism and local control. Still, I am not willing to leap so quickly to the conclusion, common for some commentators, that we are in the midst of a major paradigm shift in the definition of human being. And I note that, for a people who imagine that we are always reinventing ourselves, it is astonishing to see how prey we are to being invented by someone else, to uncritically received stories from the television and fads or even demagogues on the Net. The point here, however, is that, according to the "Bowling Alone" study, community, even a kind of assembly, does still strongly figure in our symbolic universe, even if it is only assembly of the virtual kind. Indeed, some commentators note that any leading characteristic which is noted in the American popular culture—say, "bowling alone"—needs always to be immediately paired with its shadow side, its opposite—say, our nearly universal longing for genuine community. (The current undertaker, for example, may be saying, "I help people develop their *own* rituals." The shadow side of that assertion is the longing for some authentic, meaningful, and deeply traditional ritual, a longing represented by the undertaker's drawing on Tibetan or Native American or Quaker sources as he helps people craft "their own" rituals.)

I also do not wish to join those who assert that a people subject to such technological devices is a people without "culture,"[12] without shared deep symbols, except as these survive in marginal groups. No, I think it wiser to recognize that longings for the deep symbol *assembly* do survive among us, and that they not infrequently break out in something more than a virtual way—in rallies and rock concerts, in parades and even the rare town meeting, in vigorous hopes for schools and workplaces to exhibit communal spirit—though these manifestations may find it difficult to give us both a sense of community and a sense of the treasured importance of each person. Furthermore, if culture is that body of enacted symbolic material that enables a people

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[12] Philip Rieff, *Fellow Teachers: Of Culture and Its Second Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972). Cf. Farley, *Deep Symbols*, 1, 27, 37. For what follows on culture and the "device," see also Richard Gaillardetz, "Doing Liturgy in a Technological Age," *Worship* 71 (1997): 429-51.

to live together in a land,[13] then, with or without technological devices, we too have stories we live by (even if they are only the narratives of television advertisements), ways of sharing food (even if we simply share a common refrigerator on the run), a set of value-carrying common symbols (even if our community is primarily virtual), and rituals (even if someone sells us his ability to help us to craft our own). These may be our ways of "living in the land," even when those ways are primarily patterns of consumerism, purchasing for the self—even purchasing rituals for the self—being then the primary form of "life."

But I think we need to acknowledge that culture is always a collective disagreement, marked with manifest as well as hidden tensions.[14] We consumers know vaguely, sometimes sharply, that purchasing is not very satisfactory as a primary form of interaction with the land. We are aware that many people among us are poor enough or alienated enough to have little role in the consumerist patterns for living. We do newly sense that our own invention of local rituals, our practice of "God decentralized,"[15] may be an important step toward living in the land together. But when the most real resources we can find for our religious practice are in Web postings, we must admit that the glowing screen finally gives cold comfort to the longing for community. The screen may give us a kind of "assembly." It may tell us stories to live by. But it cannot give us a real, shared meal, except in the sad but widespread parody of overeating junk food alone before the screen. And it cannot enable us genuinely to send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared.

I want to argue that we can offer each other better, deeper cultural practices, practices that enable us to live more fully and meaningfully with each other in the land, than can be possible with these device-determined fulfillments of our symbolic longings. I want to say that our "sad flesh" does not need to be left behind as we exercise our hunger for deep symbols in our flights into virtual identity. It—we—can come into a real meeting, a meeting that cares profoundly about our common existence together in-the-flesh, in the flesh beloved of God. I want to propose that we try the recovered practice of the Christian deep symbol *assembly*.

It will take some recovery. We have had "going to church." Subtly, gradually, our gatherings have become a kind of religious consumerism, as well. We have come together to the ministrations of the expert religious professional. We have purchased such ministrations as we decided what we needed for our selves, chosen the place of our purchases according to our own taste in music, ritual, or rhetoric. It is no wonder that anxiety about the results of "bowling alone" in our church attendance has led some of us to heighten the consumerist appeals to the "market." And it is no wonder that people searching for a genuinely religious alternative to the consumerist patterns turn away from the churches as being too little spiritual, too little "other," searching instead in the religious cultures of oppressed or marginalized or exotic peoples. Perhaps, indeed, in older times, a full community-life around "going to church" provided constant reinforcement to Christianity as a way-of-life, but now that fuller community life is gone, if it was ever there. Now we have going to church, sometimes.

Let us, then, recover assembly, keep assembly, honor and love the assembly.

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[13] Lathrop, *Holy People*, 66.

[14] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 56-58.

[15] *New York Times Magazine*, December 7, 1997.

Making up our own private rituals is singularly unsatisfying. All we will meet in them, finally, is our own untranscendent selves.

Why? To start with, because making up our own private rituals is singularly unsatisfying. All we will meet in them, finally, is our own untranscendent selves. If our cultural situation requires of us that we engage in the marketplace, then let us set out amid the commerce of our cities the free and communal Bread of grace—the surprising commerce of God's blessedness given freely in exchange for our wretchedness and inviting us to turn toward the needs of our neighbor[16]—rather than the Stone of the lonely self, the only *virtually* accompanied and thus still lonely self. Ancient—even exotic—wisdom, after all, is available within the Christian tradition. Christians believe that those ancient assemblies, their shape, their intention, their word, their meal, their portions for the hungry, are our heritage and gift in the local *ekklesia*. And the central matters of the assembly, the central matters of catholic worship—stories to live by, an important communal meal, the establishment of our identity in baptism—are stunningly relevant to daily North American life, to a people in quest of identity, nostalgic for communal and meaningful meals, searching for worthy stories to live by.

What do I mean by "assembly"? I mean a fully participating gathering, manifestly and strongly centered, every Sunday, around the reading and preaching of Scripture as Book of Life, the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the life-giving Meal *par excellence*, and the sending of food and help "to those for whom nothing is prepared." I mean such a gathering constituted by baptism, remembering baptism, and singing and praying around the central matters of word and sacrament. I mean a gathering with such a strong center, but also with very open doors, with a very permeable exterior boundary, with a strong welcome to "strangers."

Assembly is the most basic symbol used by Christian worship. And the renewed practice of assembly is probably the primary need for any authentic liturgical renewal in our current cultural context.[17]

Indeed, assembly can engage and respond to American culture in deeply important ways. Assembly can release us from the perpetual need to invent ourselves, inviting us rather to be a people formed by the Spirit in identity with Jesus Christ, who identifies with all the hungry and the godless, and thus to be a people standing before the living God. At the same time, assembly can reflect the deep current longing for the decentralized: catholic church is always profoundly local assembly. It is never appropriately a local office representing headquarters somewhere else, though it is indeed—and very helpfully—local assembly sending and receiving signs of communion with all the other assemblies and with a meaning that is also more-than-local. And assembly can appropriately reflect some-

[16] Martin Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ," 5; LW 35:51-52; WA 2:743-44.

[17] Lathrop, *Holy People*, 21-48, 73-98.

thing of democratic values: all the people welcome to participate; each one honored; many ministers representing and serving the people; and therefore a resistance to making the single charismatic leader into the center of the meeting.

And, perhaps in the most important connection to current culture, assembly can receive our longing for community, but criticize it, invite it to transformation. Here is a "community" which has the central matters of God's gift in common, not our quest for immediate access to the other.[18] Here is a strongly local gathering which has a continual impulse toward the more-than-local at its heart. Here is a meeting where the leaders are frequently from elsewhere and always in communion with a larger reality, as large as possible a reality. Here is a community where one who is in the very middle of the meeting—Jesus Christ who identifies with all outsiders—constantly criticizes and breaks down any boundary around the community. Here is a gathering where sending portions to those for whom nothing is prepared belongs to the essence of the gathering.

Such an assembly, as both gift and task for our local congregations, will need to occur without much support from our current culture. Even though "assembly" stands in dialogue with the values and deep symbols of our cultural moment, it is also strange, unknown, rare. At the same time, such an assembly will need to avoid attempts of withdrawal from cultural engagement, as if it were a community of "resident aliens." Just as its stories of grace amid death and life are a transformation of our hopes for stories to live by, and just as its meals and its sending of portions are a critique and transformation of both our meal-keeping and our economy, so also the gathering around these things receives our hope for community, brings that hope under criticism, and offers us a beginning of our culture's hopes transformed.

Here is a beginning: Love your own assembly. See it as Sinai, the Water Gate, Mount Zion drawing the nations. See it as the very place where the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God actually are dwelling amid the communion—this very communion—of the Holy Spirit. Believe what the word of greeting at the outset of the liturgy says.[19] Do not be afraid. Help the assembly stay strongly centered on the central matters, on the book and the meal and the sending to the hungry, not on our own menu of tastes in music or style, not on the charismatic leader or the charismatic band or the charismatic organ, not on whatever clichés we may have for "going to church." Help the assembly open its doors. Welcome everyone, old hand and newest inquirer alike, to the dignity of being a participant in the assembly of God.

Then, we need to go on to consider whether this meeting has a pattern or shape. But that is another lecture.

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[18] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, *Works* 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996): 32-33.

[19] 2 Cor 13:13, the apostolic greeting accompanying the encouragement to the holy kiss and the greetings from all the other assemblies at the end of Paul's letter, is the opening greeting exchanged at the outset of many eucharistic liturgies today.

2. Ordo

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Is there a shape for the gathering?

Take an approach which may at first seem indirection, digression. In order to consider the shape of Christian worship, consider first the shape of the gospel books themselves. For example, consider the odd conclusion of the Gospel of Mark and its structural implications. Widespread scholarly consensus now concedes that Mark 16:8, with its astonishing last words, "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid," does indeed form that conclusion. It is no wonder, with such an ending, that the manuscript tradition gave us several other ways to go on, alleviating this embarrassment, but, we now think, the great, authoritative Vaticanus and Sinaiticus—not to mention Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, and several important and early old Latin, old Syriac, old Georgian, and old Armenian witnesses—were right.[1] The book ends here. Why?

One way to answer that question proposes that such an ending inevitably creates an intended cyclic reading of the book. The readers of the book—and those who hear it read in a Christian gathering—know that Jesus is risen. In spite of the silence and fear of the women, the word has somehow come to the community around the book. In fact, the book itself, as a whole, is such a word. To resolve the puzzle of the ending as it is read in an assembly, the readers and hearers go back to read again. Soon they hear, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God..." (1:14). The people gathered together in this reading are back in "Galilee,"[2] the very place to which the young man who was seated at the tomb sent the community: "there you will see him, just as he told you" (16:7); the very place promised by Jesus himself: "after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (14:28). The risen Christ is encountered in the actual text of the book and in the proclamation and engagement that arise from the book. The gospel-book is as its title declares: *arché tou euangeliou*, both beginning and ground of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel book, read in the assembly, read about the powerful but hidden—and finally *crucified*—Jesus, is *itself* the resurrection appearance.

From such a reading of Mark, we can say that the liturgical tradition of singing around the reading of the Gospel in the assembly—"Glory to you, O Lord" and "Praise to you, O Christ"—profoundly ac-

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[1] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 226.

[2] Cf. Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1959), 59-61.

cords with the purpose of the book itself. From such a reading of Mark, we can say that Martin Luther was articulating the very intention of at least this evangelist, and not just his own idiosyncratic idea, when he wrote "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels"—for example, in this passage:

> When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel.[3]

But how *does* Jesus work in these texts? In exactly what ways might the actions or sayings of Jesus in the texts give word to what is happening to the present hearers? We have come to understand that, in the early communities, stories of Jesus and the sayings of Jesus circulated orally—and perhaps in some written collections, as well—until they were gathered together into the gospels, wherein they had ongoing communal life. But we have only recently been reflecting again on the diversity of the forms of gospel-books as they circulated in the first centuries. Now, John Dominic Crossan, in a recent study, has helpfully provided a typology of these books.[4] For Crossan, two of the four types he identifies are most important. There are *discourse gospels* and there are *biographical gospels*. The discourse gospels—one may take the Gospel of Thomas as prototypical—have no "stories of Jesus." In fact, these gospels evidence no interest in history and no historical anchor. They are all post-resurrection revelations, collections of sayings most largely understood as revealed to individuals. If a community is reading the book, then, the accent will be falling on the *individuals* in that community as they hear about the revealed techniques for their own individual salvation. The content of the books is largely knowledge of technique, of *askesis*, to enable the self to escape the fleshly conditions of life into salvational fulfillment. As Crossan says, the trajectory of these gospel books is toward "sarcophobic" Christianity, toward the kind of Christian practice which later will be called "gnosticism."

But the very existence of these discourse gospels helps us to see with greater clarity the characteristics of the gospel books called *biographical*. These are the four books we know as the canonical gospels. And here there is a fierce interest in history, in stories of Jesus, in the community around Jesus, in the death of Jesus, and in the encounter with his resurrection. Sayings of Jesus are present in these books as well, but they are pulled into the story, united with the narrative of the history of the one who comes to the cross, made part of the gospel. There are also individuals who encounter Christ here, including individuals who encounter the risen one. But such individuals are always gathered again into the community, sent again to the assembly, as Mary Magdalene is so sent, apostle to the apostles, in John 20:17-18. For Crossan, the trajectory of these books is toward "sarcophilic Christianity," toward a community that honors the conditions of the created world

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[3] LW 35:121.

[4] John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 36-38.

within which it lives. In any case, as these books were read in assembly, the community would have heard stories read to proclaim the work of the risen Christ in the midst of the community, exactly as Mark's Gospel seems to have intended, for the risen Christ was perceived to be none other than the historical Jesus of the stories, indeed the historically crucified Jesus, encounterable now. Stories—even stories of the same event—could be told with differing accents precisely because the intention of the telling was to announce the work of the historic-crucified-risen one in the present community.

It is not only the ending of Mark that gives evidence of this intention of the biographical or canonical gospels. The very collection of stories and sayings in the four books is arranged in such a way that the individual pericopes are made to lean forward toward the account of Jesus' passion and resurrection. These books *are*, in a sense, "passion narratives with extended introductions," as Martin Kähler said.[5] Or, rather, they are passion and resurrection accounts with long—and now communally important—introductions. The narrative strategies of the "messianic secret" in Mark and of the "book of signs" in the Fourth Gospel, for example, make clear that it is the crucified-risen one, the one "whose hour is come," the one who is now revealed to faith, who makes the new wine of the gospel flow in the "wedding feast" of the present church, replacing the old religious water of purity laws (John 2:1-11), or who now heals and forgives in the actual house-church assembly (Mark 1:40–2:12). The Markan church, sent back to the story by its ending, is in on the secret, is made to be assembly around Jesus, and encounters the risen one in the stories themselves. For the Johannine church, these things "are written that you [plural] may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you [plural] may have life in his name" (John 20:21).

Community, history, interest in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the historical story as a form for speaking to the present—these things are shared in common by the canonical gospels in contrast with the discourse gospels. But one other thing belongs uniquely to the canonical gospels as well: a specific shape. Mark moves from the baptism of Jesus to the collected stories and sayings of Jesus to the meal (or meals) which show forth the meaning of the passion to the passion itself to the ending which sends the reading community back to the beginning of the book again. Although the other three gospels may add the Johannine prologue or the infancy narratives—passages used to proclaim the origin of Jesus—they too follow exactly the same shape: baptism, narratives, meal and passion, resurrection and sending. Why? Why did the Markan form become normative?

"Biographical interest," we may say. The flow of Jesus' life provided the structure for the collections and creations of each work. It may be so. But another possibility is this: baptism and the remembrance of baptism as the community forming event, an assembly around narratives and preaching, the meal-form encounter with the cross, the resurrection-based sending, the expectation of returning to proceed through this pattern again—such a list is, in exactly this order, recognizable to us as the emerging shape of the Christian Sunday meeting. Given the clear interest, arguable for both Mark and John, in the texts coming to expression in a Christian assembly around the

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[5] Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1964), 80, n. 11.

risen one, this latter proposal seems to be the stronger one. Did the gospel books come to shape and perhaps even provide a kind of manual for the Christian practice?[6] Or did the Christian practice give shape to the gospel books, which then, in turn, gave words and meaning to the practice? We do not know. Probably both. In any case, Sunday *ordo* and the shape of the canonical gospels are, from the beginning, intertwined.

It is no wonder, then, that the three gospels after Mark all add an image of the Christian assembly at the end of their books, as the locus of the appearance of the risen one. Mark's Gospel as a whole already provides a schema for such a meeting, the material for such a locus of appearance. The other canonical gospels make this assembly-locus explicit, gathering up and expressing the intention of their form of the gospel genre with this final image. In Luke, the *ordo* of the gathering is itself visible. Jesus is known, by the pilgrims to Emmaus, in the Scriptures read and preached and in the breaking of the bread. Then the little community explodes in mission: they return to the city of death with the news of life. Assembly is linked to assembly (24:13-35). John provides the note of ritual recurrence to the meeting for recognition, faith and sending: "Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house..." (20:26 RSV). And Matthew points to the communal responsibility for that baptism into that triune reality of God with which the whole gospel-*ordo* has begun, as the Son is baptized under the voice of the Father and the outpouring of the Spirit. At the same time, Matthew asserts the continual presence of the risen one in that community of baptism: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (28:20). There is no "ascension" here.

But these stories were not told in order to make the hearers wish they had been there. Rather, in each case, the stories at the



end of the gospels characterize the actual continuing life of the assemblies that knew this book. Scripture, the meal, and mission can be recognized as the pattern which was known in the Lukan churches (cf. Acts 2:41-47; 20:7-12), a pattern we too have received. The Johannine churches met eight days later, and eight days later, and eight days later, and we too have received that unbroken tradition of Sunday meeting. And the Matthean baptizing and teaching have continued to form the assemblies, including our own. Indeed, even Mark may have a reference to baptism at the end of the book, as part of the way in which the hearers were sent again to the "Galilee" of their own assembly. In a way that seems quite Markan, the young man who sends the community back to Galilee (Mark 16:5), back to the encounter with the risen one in the assembly, could be interpreted as a *neophyte*, the naked man from the garden scene (Mark 14:51-52) now newly baptized in the death and resurrection of Christ and newly clothed. In a reversal, then, the latest, newest member of the community gives instruction to

[6] Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

By the time the gospels were written, Christians were gathering on Sunday for word and meal and sending, and they understood that gathering as constituted by baptism.

all the others about the resurrection and about the importance of the assembly.[7]

But if something like this correspondence between gospel shape and assembly pattern is correct, then these four gospels provide us with profound insight into the *ekklesia*, the meeting around the risen one. For an understanding of some of the earliest churches, we now have not just the name "assembly," *ekklesia*, borrowed from the Hebrew Scripture tradition and applied eschatologically. We also have the great outlines of an *ordo*, widely shared in Christian circles and remarkably reflective of those central elements which could be discovered in the formative narratives of God's action in the assemblies at Sinai, at the Water Gate, at Mount Zion. By the time the gospels were written, Christians were gathering on Sunday for word and meal and sending, and they understood that gathering as constituted by baptism. Such an outline ought not be regarded, then, as the accidental development of later Christian history. The very dynamics of the *ordo* are available to us in the canonical gospels. The "problem of the origin of the *ordo*," as Alexander Schmemann called one of his most basic questions,[8] needs to be discussed with New Testament evidence in hand.

We can say even more. This outline of the meeting represented the profound Christian idea—the "sarcophilic" Christian idea—that the actual history and death of Jesus inaugurated the Eschaton of God. God's acting in justice and mercy for the healing of the created world could therefore be proclaimed into the gathered communities, in the power of the Spirit, by telling there the stories of Jesus and, reinterpreted through him, the very stories of Israel, and by eating there the eschatological feast of his gift. The assembly was thus a gathering through the Spirit, in the presence of the risen one, before the face of God, an experience of what Christians would later call the "Trinity." And this encounter with the Eschaton, with what came to be called "the resurrection," was taking place in every local assembly—not in Jerusalem alone, nor Rome alone, nor some other "apostolic headquarters." The local meeting, imaged and reflected at the end of each gospel book and by the gospel book itself, was the holy place of eschatological assembly. "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church," the four gospels can be taken as saying, as Ignatius of Antioch would express this same idea a few decades after their composition. In each local place, the bath remembered next to the words empowered by the Spirit next to the meal held as the taste of the end-time feast proclaimed the meaning of the death of Jesus and thus the meaning of life, of the world, of human deaths, and of words themselves, in the light of the judgment and

[7] Cf. Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo, 1986), 207-9.

[8] Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966), 40-71.

mercy of God. And by gathering in this reality, again and again, eighth day after eighth day, the assemblies were formed as witnesses—to the one who went before them, to "all that I have commanded you," to the Triune God, to the forgiveness of sins, to the presence of God's mercy in the world.

This interest in what Crossan calls the biographical gospels as illuminating the classic shape of the liturgy appropriately arises in the late twentieth century. The liturgical scholarship of our current century has shown a great interest in liturgical "shape."[9] For many of us, the flow or outline or *ordo* of what Christians do when they gather together is more important than the texts of that gathering or, rather, the *ordo* of the event is the matrix for those texts and provides the way in which they come to meaning. Numerous Christian communities have used recent liturgical publications—the Presbyterians in their *Book of Common Worship*, the EKD and the VELKD in Germany with their *Erneuerte Agende*, English-speaking Roman Catholics with their proposed new sacramentary, the ELCA with its *With One Voice*, even the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches with its proposals for ecumenical eucharists[10]—to make a great, ecumenically recognizable shape available as a principal local liturgical tool. With a local knowledge of the *ordo*, many books and many musical sources may provide materials for a local community to use in enacting the patterned event of the liturgy. By such a conception, liturgy is not determined by the "Gutenberg galaxy." It is not a "print event," following a single book's prescriptions, marching through a set of texts. Every meeting has its "liturgy," its public work, its ritual shape. The question for a Christian meeting is whether or not that public work accords profoundly with gospel meaning.

But the idea of the "shape of the liturgy" is not a twentieth-century invention. In fact, it has become clear that the great preponderance of Christian liturgical history has been marked by the mutual sharing of an *ordo* for liturgy rather than the imposition of a single liturgical text. The ancient church orders, the Eastern *typicon*, the Western medieval *ordines romani*, many of the Lutheran *Kirchenordungen*, the Reformed directories for worship—these all share the idea that Christian liturgy is the order of a communal action, for which Bibles or lectionaries and then also other books of texts and of music provide variable resources. Martin Luther's two great essays on the celebration of the mass—*Formula Missae et Communionis* and the *Deutsche Messe*—need to be regarded in just this way: they are critical essays about how to use available materials within the received shape of the liturgy. They are not "liturgies." The famous eighteenth-century American Lutheran "liturgy" of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg is much the same thing. It is not Muhlenberg's longed-for "one book for one people." It is an outline and an essay, written by hand and mostly circulated among pastors in manuscript form, about the use of the diverse available resources for congregations to enact the classic *ordo*. Now, for the ELCA, the *ordo* of *With One Voice* (pp. 8-9) might best be understood in the same light: a guide to the use of the material of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and of *With One Voice* itself—as well as the resources in other supplementary volumes—in a faithful local liturgy.

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[9] Most famously in Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre, 1945), and Schmemann, *Introduction.*

[10] *Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998).

In fact, it is the idea of "one book," of the liturgy being contained in a single volume, which is the odd thing in liturgical history. The idea was especially invented in post-tridentine Roman Catholicism, with the imposition of a single "Roman Missal" on all the churches in communion with Rome, as a symbol of the increased centralism of that communion, and in Reformation England, with the imposition of the otherwise interesting *Book of Common Prayer*, as a sign of the political intentions of the Act of Uniformity. In neither case was this central imposition very profoundly in accord with deep liturgical principles. In our present times, we will find the practice of Luther's critical but *ordo*-based approach to be much the most interesting and helpful way to proceed.

In all of this talk about *ordo* in our times, one of the great resources has been the writings of Justin, called Martyr. At the end of his *First Apology* for the Christian faith, addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius in about the middle of the second century, Justin included this description of the Sunday assembly, immediately following upon his description of baptism:

> And for the rest after these things [after baptism is enacted] we continually remind each other of these things [of baptism]. Those who have the means help all those who are in want, and we continually meet together. And over all that we take to eat we bless the creator of all things through God's Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. And on the day named after the sun all, whether they live in the city or the countryside, are gathered together in unity. Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer. And, as we said before, when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water. The presider likewise offers up prayer and thanksgiving, as much as he can, and the people sing out their assent saying the *amen*. There is a distribution of the things over which thanks have been said and each person participates, and these things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present. Those who are prosperous and who desire to do so, give what they wish, according to each one's choice, and the collection is deposited with the presider. He aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through disease or through another cause, those who are in prison, and foreigners who are sojourning here. In short, the presider is a guardian to all those who are in need. We hold this meeting together on the day of the sun since it is the first day, on which day God, having transformed darkness and matter, made the world. On the same day Jesus Christ our savior rose from the dead...he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them these things which we have presented to you....[11]

And then, with Justin's report, the first full direct witness to the shape of the Christian Sunday assembly, we are back in touch with the four gospel books again. Here too is assembly, formed by baptism, gathered around the word, celebrating the meal, and sending both the community and food "to those for whom nothing is prepared." That importance of Sunday, of the recurring *ordo*, of history, of the Triune God, of communal assembly, and of sending is shared by Justin with his very "memoirs of the apostles," the canonical gospels.

Is it shared by us? While we cannot say that all Christians everywhere have shared this Sunday *ordo*, we can say that

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[11] Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67. Translation in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 45, 63-64.

Justin's *ordo* accords with the four gospels of the New Testament and that it has come to us, as our heritage, as the deep, given order of our assemblies. This *ordo* is the catholic shape of the liturgy.

But deformations are quite possible. Throughout the history of the general use of this shape by Christian gatherings, people have sometimes forgotten the meaning of its structure. Preaching has disappeared or the purpose of preaching has been lost. The entire event has been clericalized, made essentially unavailable to the whole assembly. The deep structure of the event has been overwhelmed by secondary matters, by cultural shards of "church" from another time, for example, or by the dominance of performers or of the musicians. Tragically, the sending has disappeared, both as sending "portions" to the hungry and signs of justice to the poor and as sending the eschatological good news to the world. And, sometimes, more and more frequently since the eighteenth century, the meal itself has been lost.

This latter loss was especially fueled by the medieval misreading of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to examine themselves that they might eat and drink, "discerning the body" (1 Cor 11:28-29). Contemporary exegetes largely agree that this "discernment" ought to be understood as a knowledge of the fullness and diversity of the assembly around the gift of the body and blood of Christ, as an openness to the poor and so to the whole "body of Christ" (cf. 1 Corinthians 12). But medieval practice took this warning to be an insistence upon being "shriven," upon penance and catechesis before communion. Going to confession frequently became more important than going to communion. And the Reformation simply continued this medieval practice. The fenced table, the ministerially-issued token for admission to the table, finally the *disappearing* table were the result. In America, the old sacrament meetings of the Scottish Presbyterians and the English Methodists, precisely because of this fencing, yielded to an *ordo* based on repentance before communion, but now *without the table*, first at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, and then throughout the American frontier. The result was the "revival or frontier *ordo*," systematized in the nineteenth century by Charles Grandison Finney: first there occurs warm-up singing and, perhaps, some other drama or display; then there follows practical and pointed preaching, based on only a few verses of Scripture; this all is intended to lead to the conversion of the individual hearer.[12] If you are American, you have encountered this *ordo*. Most recently, such a pattern of gathering has had its most vocal support in the so-called megachurches or in Christian gatherings under their influence, although

Throughout the history of the general use of this shape by Christian gatherings, people have sometimes forgotten the meaning of its structure.

[12] See Gordon W. Lathrop, "New Pentecost or Joseph's Britches? Reflections on the History and Meaning of the Worship Ordo in the Megachurches," *Worship* 72 (1998): 521-38.

there the third part of the pattern, "conversion," has undergone transformation to become the invitation to participation in need-based small groups and therapies.

The danger of this widespread and influential pattern should now be clear, however. Its characteristics—only a little Scripture, and that mostly Scripture verses with an accent on technique; the importance of the individual; no meal; little sense of assembly—place it far closer to the discourse gospels, to the old sarcophobic way, than to the assemblies of the four gospels of the New Testament. This *ordo* can easily support, without challenge or transformation, American individualism and the gnostic tendency of American religion.[13]

Instead, the serious challenge to the churches of present North America is to recover the *ordo* of the four gospels as the central focus and form of all of our Sunday meetings. It is this *ordo* which will give us a place to stand in North America—a place to receive and welcome the gifts of our cultures; a place from which to challenge our cultural malformations as they encounter the eschatological judgment and mercy of God. Mutual affirmation and admonition between the churches—of whatever "denomination"—should call us to the recovery of this shape of the liturgy. As a consultation sponsored by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches put it:

> [This *ordo*] is the inheritance of all the churches, founded in the New Testament, locally practiced today, and attested to in the ancient sources of both the Christian East and the Christian West.... Churches may rightly ask each other about the local inculturation of this *ordo*. They may call each other toward a maturation in the use of this pattern or a renewed clarification of its central characteristics or, even, toward a conversion to its use.[14]

We need to let the *ordo* stand forth in strength, engaging participation, recovering both rich lectionary use and vigorous preaching, encouraging the full community to eat and drink, opening the door, resisting the old fences, recovering the sending, using this liturgy as a "manual for healing the world."[15] We need a liturgy which has a strong center, in the central elements of the gospel *ordo*, and a wide open door.

Of course, the celebration of this *ordo* in different places will be richly diverse. There are, after all, *four* gospels, not one. Four different early witnesses surround the one crucified and risen Christ, using the one pattern of meeting in the Triune God, just as the four beasts surround the one seated upon the throne (Revelation 4). The gospel books themselves demonstrate the importance and diversity of locality, of contextualization, from the very outset of the Christian movement. This *ordo* is the basic tool of such localization, as the local language, the local patterns of gathering, the local music, and the local food and water come to the meeting.

On the other hand, it is still the four gospels—the gospels of baptism, word, meal, and sending, the gospels of the historic-crucified-risen one proclaimed in each place—which are canonical, foundational to authentic church. We cannot make up just any order, nor center the meeting on our own brilliant ideas or techniques, without

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[13] Cf. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

[14] "The Ditchingham Report," 4 and 7, in *So We Believe, So We Pray: Towards Koinonia in Worship*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, Faith and Order Paper 171 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995), 6-7.

[15] Paul Gibson, *Patterns of Celebration* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), 89.

tearing the church apart. Nor ought we put the manner of music or the matter of style at the center of the meeting, as the "menu" approach to worship so easily does, making "traditional" or "contemporary" and our consumer choice between the two of far too great importance.

To express this dialectic of contextualization in Lutheran confessional terms: the *ordo* of the four gospels belongs to that assembly in word and sacrament confessed by Article 7 of the Augustana; it belongs therefore to the grounds of the true unity of the church, that actuality of *church-as-assembly-around-the-means-of-grace* which unites us, even when locally determined "rites and ceremonies of human institution"—of cultural origin—may distinguish and divide us. On the other hand, according to Article 15 of the same Confession, regional synods or even worldwide communions of churches may indeed decide on details of church order and liturgy which they will share, to enable peace, good order, and mutuality between them, as long as they do not teach that these details are necessary to salvation or enforce them with the heavy hand of excommunication. It may only be added that, given the current great diversity of life in North America, we may be better served in the present time by recovering a strong accent on the *ordo* as the basis for our unity than by trying to live out Muhlenberg's old dream of "one book." Still, in whatever communal action we may construct, each in our own cultural locality, around the central gospel events of the liturgy, we will do well not to lose the rich biblical imagery and the ritual and festal recurrence of classic Christian liturgy which have served us so well over the ages. And leaders of liturgy will do well to avoid deceiving themselves that they are celebrating the *ordo*, when the real center of the meeting has been made to be their own self-expression.

Taught by the *ordo* itself, the strongest manner of localization, contextualization, will almost always put one thing next to another in a mutually critical pattern of meaning. Just as the shape of the liturgy puts scriptural text next to scriptural text, word next to meal, gathering next to sending, and just as classic Lutheran worship always used both chant and chorale to enact the *ordo*, so North American worship now will need to be culturally eclectic in musical style, but require all the power of any music to be broken to serve the assembly, to give voice to the assembly, as it gathers around the central matters of the gospels.[16]

North American worship now will need to be culturally eclectic in musical style, but require all the power of any music to be broken to serve the assembly.

Such a use of the *ordo* of the gospels can welcome many of the values of the North American cultures and challenge others. Here a certain "democracy" and a critique of authority, so beloved of Americans, are mirrored in an assembly-serving

[16] Paul Westermeyer, "What music should we use in worship?" in *What is Contemporary Worship? Open Questions in Worship*, 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995): 6-14.

leadership made up of many persons, in the midst of encouraged participation. Here American individualism is not denied, but called, like Mary Magdalene in John 20, to come into the assembly, into the *personal-communal* assembly. But also, here the interest of some Americans in finding, as the center of religion, a centralized institution or an infallible Bible or the authority of a personal vision or the charisma of a single preacher,[17] will be challenged to find, rather, the strong weakness of God present in a local assembly of folks, gathered in the *ordo* of the gospels, sending and receiving signs of communion with other such local assemblies.

How the local is to be in communion with the universal is an old Christian and human question. It is also a question of burning importance today. But we have seen that the four gospels are books full of their own local speech and their own powerful images, broken to speak of Jesus Christ and his cross, broken to the eschatological purposes of God. Furthermore, the central matters of Christian assembly—a local community, local powerful speech, a local meal, all broken to the catholic purpose of the assembly—give us not just a center, but also a method. Just so, local customs, local ethnicity, local music, local leadership are never enough in themselves to communicate the gospel's purpose. But gathered into the assembly's purpose, made to serve its center and its open door, caused to sing not of themselves but of the experience of the Trinity, these things are welcome, like the nations and their treasures being welcomed into the city of God (Rev 21:26).

For church, *ekklesia*, assembly, is always local. And yet its *ordo* comes with the gospel itself, a gift beyond the possibility for our locality to invent, a gift that welcomes our locality to salvation.

We could go on to consider each part of this *ordo* and each feature of its history in far greater detail. We could also turn to a consideration of the other *ordines* that circle around this central practice of the church like planets around the sun: the patterns of daily prayer and of the observance of time through the year; the order of the readings themselves and of the Christian use of the Psalter; various orders for marrying and burying and other marks of human passage, as these culturally important and laden events meet the gospel of Christ; and, most especially, the order that belongs to welcoming someone into identity with Christ and into assembly participation, the *ordo* of baptism. At the edge of the twenty-first century, deep knowledge of each of these patterns is in need of refreshment. For now, it is enough to say these explorations and this refreshment exactly concern the ELCA seminary professors of worship, my colleagues, in their work in each place. Let me urge you to be in dialogue with them. In the time that remains, let us, instead, pick just one part of the *ordo* to consider further. Let us turn to *preaching*.

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[17] Peter Berger, "Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty," *The Christian Century* 115:23 (August 26–September 2, 1998), 782-85, 792-96.

3. Preaching

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What is preaching for?[1]

Begin again with Scripture. See again how the best place for us to turn as we think about the basic shape and meaning of Christian worship in the present cultural moment continues to be the biblical origin of the patterns and images for our gatherings. Only now, in addition to an image from the Hebrew Scriptures or the pattern of the gospel books, turn with me to two specific texts that provide us with a model for *preaching*.

We can begin with one of the archetypical sermons of primitive Christianity: the preaching of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). Jesus comes to the assembly, rises to read, is given the scroll of Isaiah (is it the assigned prophetic reading of the day?), sits to preach, announces the presence of the liberation promised in the text, sets two other texts—about Elijah and the hungry widow and Elisha and the leper Naaman, about two outsiders—side by side with Isaiah. There follows an uproar, a down payment on Jesus' death. Note, however, that in this text, just as in Justin's report of Sunday, the sermon occurs within an assembly, a gathering for worship, and follows upon and interprets the reading of a given lectionary text.

Yngve Brilioth, in his old but still magisterial history of Christian preaching, finds in this Lukan account the three *Grundmomenten*, the three basic motifs of all Christian preaching. In fact, he uses his entire book to trace these motifs of the sermon in Luke 4, critically but irenically, in their balance, their imbalance, and their development, throughout all of church history.[2] Brilioth calls these motifs or elements the *liturgical*, the *exegetical*, and the *prophetic*, i.e., Jesus' sermon occurs within worship, interprets the given passage of Scripture (setting it alongside several other passages as well), and speaks into the present with divine and revelatory authority: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Of course, in the Lukan account, what would ordinarily follow such a sermon in the synagogue is interrupted. The *ordo* is not completed because the revelatory character of the sermon becomes an occasion of active unfaith and rejection.

But, if we set beside this sermon in Nazareth the similarly Lukan account of the preaching of the risen Christ to the disciples on the way to Emmaus (24:13-35), we can find the same *Grundmomenten*, now turned toward the hearing of faith. With the "sermon" on the way to Emmaus, the Lukan

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[1] This lecture was first delivered, in a different form, to the final meeting of the Worship and Culture Team of the Lutheran World Federation, held in River Forest, Illinois, in May 1998.

[2] Yngve Brilioth, *Predikans historia* (Lund: Gleerup, 1945), 7-9; English translation in *A Brief History of Preaching*, trans. Karl E. Mattson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 8-10.

The "sermon" of Luke 24 becomes a prototype for Christian preaching to enable and create faith.

pattern of preaching can be seen as archetypical for the *church*. In this account, the event does not occur in the "sacred space" of an assembly hall, but on the road and in a house. But because the whole event takes place on Sunday in a small assembly and because it leads to the "breaking of bread," echoing the basic *ordo* of all subsequent Christian Sunday assemblies and reflecting the conversion of houses to the purposes of that *ordo* (a conversion concurrent with Luke's writing), the *liturgical* motif can be recognized, in its uniquely Christian form: preaching is found especially on Sunday, in assembly, in the house-churches, at Eucharist. Furthermore, the *exegetical* motif is present in force: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures" (24:27). And the sermon is strongly *prophetic*, revelatory: "Were not our hearts burning within us...while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (24:32)

Indeed, the presence of the same prophetic preacher can be an occasion for offense (4:28) or for the meal of faith (24:31). In the "shape" of preaching presented by these two passages of the Third Gospel, the encounter with the crucified-risen Lord in the meal and the conscious awareness of that Lord's presence in the word, in the one account, replaces the rejection of all outsiders and the foreshadowing of the death of Jesus in the other. In Luke 4, because the community does not wish to be among the needy poor, sharing the famine and then also the relieving meal with the outsider widow of Zarephath, sharing the leprosy and then also the relieving bath with the foreigner Naaman, they drive Jesus out. Jesus was welcome as "one of ours"—"beautiful sermon, Jesus! Aren't our children great?"—but not as the breaker of the strong boundaries of the meeting. It is as if, had anyone listened to Jesus, they would have asked how they might follow the sermon by sharing in Zarephath's meal or Naaman's bath, thereby joining those outsiders whose only hope is in God. In Luke 24, precisely because the sermon opens hearts to faith, it also leads to hospitality for the stranger, to the shared celebration of the life-giving meal, and to the running back to the "city of death" to tell of a new vision of the world.

The "sermon" of Luke 24 becomes a prototype for Christian preaching to enable and create faith. It is not that by way of self-congratulation in Christian circles; the aborted sermon of Luke 4 remains possible. But in Luke 24, the sadness and loss of the disciples—but also the rejection of outsiders and the foreshadowed death of Jesus—are transformed by the presence of the risen Lord in the interpreted word of the Scriptures, a presence recalled, confirmed, and supported through the risen one's presence in the meal. The sermon of Luke 24 can and must stand side by side with the life-giving meal and, by implication, with the life-giving bath and the openness to strangers.

But this prototype stands also against a background in the Hebrew Scriptures. The very *ordo* of Nazareth and, especially, of Emmaus is found also, for example, in that account of the "great synagogue" we have already considered from Nehemiah 8. There

the men and women who have returned from the exile are gathered in the open air as assembly (8:2). There the scripture, the "book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel" (8:1), is read. God is worshipped as present in this reading (8:6), and the Levites and Ezra give the sense or meaning of the text so that the people understand the reading (8:8). This reading and preaching also lead to faith—or at least to mourning and weeping and then to comfort and great rejoicing in the strength of the LORD (8:9-12)—and to a meal shared with the poor (8:10,12). The place and function of preaching in the *ordo* of Nehemiah 8 are exactly the place and function found in Luke 24 and aborted in Luke 4. Only now the crucified and risen one is the content of preaching, the presence of the "strength of the LORD," the grounds of the shared meal, the one associated with the strangers and outsiders, and the source of service and mission.

These texts can give biblical resonance and depth to our reading of the two major second-century accounts of preaching in the Christian assembly. In mid-second century, as we have seen, Justin wrote:

> And on the day named after the sun all, whether they live in the city or the countryside, are gathered together in unity. Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer... when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water....[3]

In the late second century, in a similar explanatory description of the practices of the Christian assembly,[4] a description that begins with prayer, Scripture reading, and preaching, and also continues with an account of the communal meal and food for the poor, Tertullian wrote:

> We come together for the reading and discussing of the sacred writings, as any quality of the present time gives occasion for forewarning or for recollection. In any case, with the holy words we feed faith, we set up hope, we build trust, and furthermore we close our ranks by the inculcation of precepts. In the same place also are exhortations, punishments and divine censures.... Certain tested presbyters preside in this....[5]

Here, too, it is clear that Christian preaching is an assembly-based action, that it is always intended to unfold and open the Scriptures that have been read, and that it is meant to "feed faith."

Even today, the place of preaching in the flow of Christian liturgy, especially the liturgy of Sunday, carries with it some of this old meaning. The location of the sermon is not arbitrary. An assembly gathers, reads the Scriptures, and then hears preaching. Following the sermon, the assembly prays in intercession and then proceeds with the celebration of the holy meal and the dismissal to mission in the world. Such a location of Christian preaching—rooted as it is in the preaching of the synagogue and of at least the Lukan communities, discoverable in the second century Sunday report

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[3] *1 Apology* 67. See longer quotation in my second lecture, p. 298 in this volume.

[4] *Coimus in coetum et congregationem... Apology* 39:2; CSEL 69:91.

[5] *Coimus ad litterarum divinarum commemorationem, si quid praesentium temporum qualitas aut praemonere cogit aut recognoscere. Certe fidem sanctis vocibus pascimus, spem erigimus, fiduciam figimus, disciplinam praeceptorum nihilominus inculcationibus densamus. Ibidem etiam exhortationes, castigationes et censura divina... Praesident probatis quique seniores... Apology* 39:3-4,5; CSEL 69:91-92.

of Justin's First Apology, and developed in the early centuries of the church—carries within itself an implied set of characteristics of preaching. A sermon in such a position must interpret the *texts* read in *assembly* so that the community may come again to *faith*, a faith then exercised (and further fed) in prayer, in the thanksgiving-supper, and in mission.

In spite of these sources and descriptions, however, preaching is in trouble in North America today. Perhaps this trouble follows from our distrust of authority of any kind and, therefore, our distrust of any single speaker who rises "six feet above contradiction." Perhaps the trouble roots in our deep distrust of words, used in our culture so frequently to sell, to garner votes, and, as if by widespread mutual agreement, to deceive. "Rhetoric" and "preaching" are not positive words. Neither is the adjective "preachy." But at least one possibility for our confusion about preaching may be our loss of the sense of its place in both *ordo* and *assembly*, our consequent tendency to use preaching like the old gnostic discourse gospels: Self speaks to self about the religious or therapeutic technique for the well-being of the self: "Let me tell you about myself."

Still, the longing for powerful, authentic speech perdures in our culture. The sermons and speeches of, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., occupy a place of honor in the national memory. How can there be public speech that is reliable and true? How shall we preach at the present time? Or shall we give up on preaching?

It is at least worth consideration for us to place preaching again within the context of the *ordo*, within the event of the assembly, to see if there is help for us there. It may be that a careful consideration of our preaching task in the light of the pattern of preaching we see in the Lukan work, for example, may enable us to ask how preaching may encounter the current cultural moment. So, there follow here, first, some words about the purpose and materials of preaching, and then a consideration of preaching and culture.

Building on the work of Brilioth—on his liturgical, exegetical, and prophetic *Grundmomenten*—but considering the sermon of Luke 24 as well as that of Luke 4, we might suggest that Christian preaching is an *assembly-based event*, a *biblical event*, and an *eschatological event* for the sake of faith. These characteristics flow from that *ordo* of Christian worship in which preaching participates, and together they make up the purpose and character of preaching. The *ordo* thus gives preaching a role, a place, a defined and resonant task within the flow of the gospel-based events.

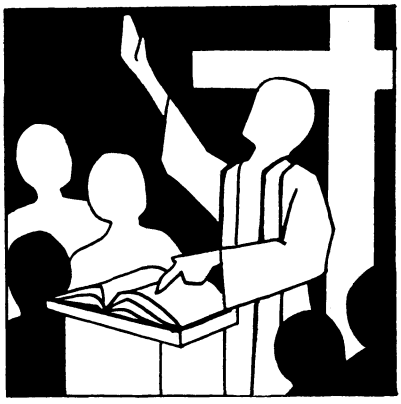
So, first of all: *preaching is an assembly-based event.* It is part of the liturgy, not something alien to it. It belongs to the flow of events, like the stranger talking to the Emmaus pilgrims and then going in to supper. It is an expression of the faith of the assembly, in communion with the faith of all the church, spoken for the purpose of grounding the community once again in that faith. While sometimes Christians have preached on the streets and in the marketplaces, away from the gathered assembly, they have usually done so going two-by-two, carrying along the communal presence of Christianity, and they have always done so with the invitation for the hearers to join the assembly: "Come and see!"

In the assembly, the preacher arises to bring to present articulation what it is the assembly is doing by gathering, reading Scripture, praying, and holding the meal on Sunday or on some other "day of the Lord." Indeed, the juxtaposition of this sermon to the celebration of the Lord's Supper makes it most clear that this is a word meant to be

eaten and drunk in faith, just as that is a meal which preaches (1 Cor 11:26). The sermon says in words from the texts the same thing the bread and cup say in sign: "The body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you. Take. Eat. Drink. Believe. Live." More: the sermon should bring to expression what "church" is at all—an open assembly, with the word of forgiveness and the bread of Christ's presence at the center, available for the world, turned toward the outsiders and the poor.

I sometimes suggest to my students that they should imagine that they have gathered with their entire family at the one-hundredth birthday of their great-grandmother. All the family, all the dozens of descendants of this woman, plus their significant others, are there. It is a great picnic, let us say, in a park. Then, because our seminarian is known as a good speaker, he or she is asked to say something to that gathering in the park. His or her task will be to bring the meaning of this event—something true about the grandmother, something true about the party, something true about the identity of the family in the world—to expression in words. Preaching is like that. Only, in the assembly, it is the church's identity in the mercy of God and the church's open boundaries in the midst of the world which are being brought to expression.

Most usually, the *presider* in this assembly is the preacher, thereby facilitating the responsibility of bringing to articulation all the rest of the events in the midst of which she or he presides. In any case, the presider supervises the preaching that takes place here. That presider—and, most usually, that preacher—is a person who is in communion with the rest of the church, called and appointed for this communal, ecclesial task. When the preacher is a traveler, a visitor, he or she takes the task, yielded with care and love by the local



presider, as a concrete sign that this local assembly is in communion with other assemblies, including the ones from which the traveler comes.

The task of preaching ought not be seen as a lonely one. On the contrary, the preacher should understand herself or himself to be in a company of presbyters—perhaps the local ecumenical text study group, if nothing else!—speaking a communal voice, supported by the prayer and love of the church, articulating the "we" of needy humanity and the "we" of faith. The Levites, together, scattered throughout the assembly of Nehemiah 8, opened the meaning of the text. Tertullian said, "*we* feed faith," proposing the interpretive task as belonging to all the assembly, with a group of elders presiding. A bishop and a company of presbyters presided in the ancient *ekklesia*. And yet, one person—or one person at a time—must arise and take authority to speak out of the Scriptures which the community has read, the church saying all the while: "and also with you! Amen. Amen." In this regard, all the churches can learn from the widespread African American Christian pattern of support and encouragement and participation with the lone voice of the

preacher. That one person's voice may be fresh, surprising, personal even, not particularly cultic, while yet never focussing on the self but on the *Scriptures* read in the assembly event.[6]

So, *this sermon is also a biblical event.* In the *ordo* of the liturgy—as also in Nehemiah 8, Luke 4, Luke 24, and the preaching described by Justin and Tertullian and encountered in Melito, 2 Clement, and Origen, to name only an early few—preaching follows the communal reading of Scripture, most often in more than one text. Preaching arises following the reading of these texts of the assembly, bringing them to living voice, articulating their lively tensions as they are set next to each other, responsible to them as they are opened to speak of the crucified and risen one and so of the presence and grace of the Triune God. Preaching may take one of the texts as its primary source, but it will not forget all of the other texts which have been read, nor all of the witness of the Scriptures and all of the ways in which Deuteronomy next to Job, Amos next to Leviticus, Paul next to James, the gospels next to the law call for us to encounter the living God through the Scriptures, beyond the Scriptures.

The preacher ought never introduce a new text—"my text"—as if the preaching event were something other than what the assembly is doing as a whole. Even Jesus was *handed* the scroll of Isaiah. In the Christian community, all the members of the assembly need to know the texts, own the texts, be able to prepare the texts.

Preaching is biblical. Augustine's great handbook for preachers proposed to teach them both the nature of biblical-symbolic speech and the use of rhetoric in expressing that speech. His intention was that preachers might be able to discover both what to preach and how to preach it.[7] Authentic Christian hermeneutics, the search for the senses and meaning of the Scripture, have continued to have a similar purpose: biblical symbolism in conjunction with assembly-based rhetoric. And yet, preaching is not commentary, not biblical lecture, not mere biblically influenced rhetoric. The purpose of the texts is not for the assembly to imagine how things might have been in other times but to encounter the biblical God, come to this time with all biblical judgment and promise. Again, Luther wrote:

> When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him.[8]

And this intention of the gospels becomes the pattern in which Christians, taught by the sermon of the risen one in Luke 24, read all of the Scriptures. God is present, addressing us, in the Scriptures.

Thus, *this preaching is an eschatological event*, the presence of God to create faith. The classic Western celebration of

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[6] See, for example, the comments of Brilioth on the preaching of Nathan Söderblom, *Predikans historia*, 252; *A Brief History*, 215: "Den, som minns predikanten i Helga Trefaldighet, kan ej upphöra att förundra sig över hur den formellt okonventionella förkunnelsen smälte in i den liturgiska ramen." "Those who remember his sermons in Holy Trinity Church in Uppsala still wonder how his informal and unconventional style could be fused into the liturgical context."

[7] Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* I:1:1. English translation in *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

[8] "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," LW 35:121.

the *ordo* has rightly surrounded the reading of Scripture with acclamations to the presence of God and with responses in the voice of the Psalms. Preaching continues and heightens this intention of the Scripture reading. Indeed, the *ordo* of the four Gospels intends the eschatological meaning of the entire assembly event. Preaching, then, brings this purpose of the meeting to direct verbal expression. These intentions point to the motif or *Grundmoment* which Brilioth calls "prophetic," that is, preaching is to be the speaking of the living word of God into the present of the hearers. At Nazareth, the form of this "prophecy" was Jesus' startling "Today!," bringing to expression the nature of Christian eschatology, the presence *now* of the judgment of God and of astonishing help for the wretched. In Luke 24, the same "Today!" functions, now in the encounter with the presence of the risen one in the very texts themselves, juxtaposed to the need of the sad and death-possessed disciples. In both Luke 4 and Luke 24, the form of this eschatological presence of God is in "law" and "gospel," in the articulation of local need and the proclamation of the presence of mercy. Taught by Paul and by the Fourth Gospel, Christians have come to say that the Spirit in the assembly enlivens the words so that they bear witness to the crucified and risen Christ (1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 3:6; John 14:26), and that where that enlivened word dwells, the Father and the Son come to dwell (John 14:23).

Preaching is a trinitarian event: enlivened by the Spirit, the words of the preacher draw the hearer into the encounter with the crucified-risen one and so into faith and hope in God, into the communal life which flows from the presence of the life-giving Trinity. The preacher articulates, in the terms of the texts, what God has done and is doing in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, in Baptism and Eucharist, and in the faith which these things sustains. Yet these things are not spoken as lectures on atonement or the sacraments or the Trinity, but as living words, participating in the realities of which they speak. Faith in the Triune God, after all, is faith in God coming now into the midst of our death and making—*giving*—life.

Faith in the Triune God, after all, is faith in God coming now into the midst of our death and making—*giving*—life.

Still, the rejection of the people in Nazareth is also always possible, the refusal of the surprising and merciful presence of God. The preacher needs to articulate the awful truth of human need, a need which many of the hearers may already know but for which they may have no words. The words of the sermon need to include the hearers together with all the outsiders and the sinners, using the terms of the texts as names for our sin and death and sorrow. There will be no insiders here; all of us need a word to say the truth about our common lot and all of us need a word in order to begin to believe again. Then the sermon will announce with strength and love the presence of the promise and grace of God, using the terms of the texts as names for the mercy of the holy one. The words of the sermon will invite the hearers to come, to bathe, to eat, to drink, to enter, to see, to follow—all of which are rich biblical metaphors for

Preaching is an assembly event, a biblical event, an eschatological event.

faith.[9] Finally, this is what preaching is for: to show forth God and God's grace, in the terms of the materials of the gathering—the texts, the sacraments, the assembly itself—so that the assembly and each of its participants may come again to faith. And the *ordo* of the liturgy will move on then to urgent prayer to God for all the needy world, to the actual meal of faith, and to the sending of food to the needy and witness to the world.

The pilgrims to Emmaus run back to Jerusalem as witnesses to faith. Indeed, it is as if they themselves have become the holy bread to feed the faith of others, as if they are the "portions sent to those for whom nothing is prepared." Once, in the sacristy before an ecumenical prayer service, I was speaking with a Salvation Army captain whom I had come to know and respect, a man working among the most wretched and destitute people of Philadelphia. I felt free enough to ask, "How is it that members of the Army, for all of their respect for the Scriptures, never celebrate the Lord's Supper?" He replied, "We trust that Christ has made us his own body and is breaking and giving us away in the world." I was, of course, stunned to silence, wishing that I and my frequently-communing co-religionists could know something of this piety. But, after a pause, he then said, "You know, now and then I go off to a Lutheran or an Episcopal church to go to Holy Communion." Ah, how we need each other, challenge each other, enable each other to live out the eschatological significance of the meeting and its preaching!

So, preaching is an assembly event, a biblical event, an eschatological event. Preachers can certainly fail in this vocation. But the biblical prototypes and the place of preaching in the *ordo* will keep holding all three of these characteristics before the churches as a shared pattern for preaching, as a sign of our communion. As such, this pattern of preaching will be available for the dialogue with local cultures, a dialogue that needs to be marked, according to the 1995 Nairobi Statement made by the Study Team on Worship and Culture of the Lutheran World Federation, by elements of the transcultural, the contextual, the countercultural, and the cross-cultural.[10] As we inquire about the place of preaching in our own cultural moment, we may make use of this very fourfold schema.

So, preaching will be *transcultural*, uniting us all across our cultural boundaries, exactly as it holds all three of these characteristics together, in strength and in balance. "Inculturation" cannot rightly decide to abandon any of these three motifs—say, to abandon preaching on biblical texts or to forget about the eschatological character of what Paul calls "preaching Christ and him crucified" as the "power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-24) or to let the sermon bear no relationship to Baptism or Eucharist or assembly—without also weakening or even abandoning the communion of the

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[9] Rudolph Bultmann, "Faith as the Hearing of the Word," *Theology of the New Testament* 2 (New York: Scribners, 1955): 70-71.

[10] Nairobi Statement 1.3, in S. Anita Stauffer, *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 24.

Christian churches. Brilioth's history gently traces ways in which preaching has sometimes lost this balance. American Protestant preaching of the early- to mid-twentieth century, for example, can be seen to have sometimes lost its exegetical focus and even its liturgical setting, while having exalted, in compensation, the "prophetic" task.[11] Much can be learned, even now, from the liberal Protestant address of the word to the current social situation in the language of the time, but such "prophecy" could easily become vague, empty of biblical content, not "eschatological" in the sense we have been employing. In time, such preaching could come to have little left but a focus on "practical advice" or on the "self" of the "prophet." And, in fact, American Protestant preaching has been recently wandering, in search of a definition. But, then, so have we all. We need to have something like the gentle and catholic spirit of Brilioth to call each other, in all of our churches, back to balance, back to the transcultural elements of our communion. We will find help in this regard as we recover lectionary preaching and communal study and discussion of the lectionary—in the local congregation, but also in ecumenical study groups of preachers, new "councils" of presbyters. And we will be assisted as we let our preaching always refer to God's action in baptism and in the supper, even if we have not yet recovered weekly Eucharist.

But Christian preaching also is called to be richly *contextual*. The tools of this contextualization, in the first place, will be the very characteristics of preaching in the *ordo*, in the assembly. A sermon will need to reflect and articulate an assembly in *this* place, with its transcultural *ordo*, but also with its local forms of participation, its local symbols and language, its local art and architecture. A sermon will need to be biblical as it uses the best local translation of the Scripture but also as it continues the translation work, seeking for local images which carry the biblical meaning and function like biblical images, articulating human need and God's grace in Christ through accessible local ways. And the sermon will need to be eschatological precisely as a speaking of God's living word to *these* hearers, in this place. It will need to use patterns of culturally recognizable powerful speech to bring together the hearts of the hearers and the word of the gospel with clarity, dignity and joy. James Nieman writes:

> Every culture has standards for powerful speech (in the West, we call this "rhetoric"), and preaching should draw from these design resources. Accessible preaching is aware of cultural expectations and uses them discerningly, being neither so esoteric nor so undignified that its message is obscured.[12]

Note that the "shape" of preaching we have been discussing remains remarkably free.[13] No strict interior design is given by this shape. Rather, the motifs of preaching which come from its place in the liturgical *ordo* all call for localization. The communal participation in preaching may be quite vocal—with the sermon being encouraged by the hearers or interwoven with communal song—or relatively quiet. A local church in North America might try multiple preachers or preaching as a dialogue. The place and posture of the preacher or preachers in the assembly needs to accord with a local

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[11] *Predikans historia*, 155; *A Brief History*, 173.

[12] "What is preaching?" in *What is changing in eucharistic practice? Open Questions in Worship* 5 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 12.

[13] Cf. Nieman, "What is preaching?" 11-12.

sense of space used in the service of the *ordo* and with the importance, dignity and communal responsibility of preaching. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of human need to God's merciful presence, the basic juxtaposition of the *ordo*, will need to come to expression in the sermon in ways that accord with local rhetoric.

Preaching is a "speech," yet it is also a communal event; an individual oration, yet responsible to and judged by a text; a human voice, yet the living voice of God.

But the sermon will also be *countercultural*. Indeed, since preaching articulates human sin and sorrow, death and need, in the terms of the texts, and yet finds those very terms converted into words for grace and the presence of the life-giving God—since our death and failure is the very place where God in Christ through the power of the Spirit has begun to set out the life-giving fountain—there is a certain *contrary character* to all faithful preaching. "When I preach a sermon," said Luther, "I make an antithesis."[14] The interior contradictions of preaching give this antithesis a form: preaching is a "speech," yet it is also a communal event; an individual oration, yet responsible to and judged by a text; a human voice, yet the living voice of God. Healthy Christian preaching cannot finally be culturally self-congratulatory, ethnically narrow, nationalistic or jingoistic, if it regularly speaks of human social and individual sin and if it regularly announces God's eschatological, boundary-breaking mercy to Zarephath and to Naaman. The very words of preaching itself, the words of the Scripture continued and translated into the terminology of the local culture, will be "broken" and converted, bringing our hearts and our cultures along, as these words are used to confess our need and proclaim God's grace. The words of the sermon need to be "*sermo conversivus*, speech that turns or re-aims,"[15] turning our hearts toward God and, thereby, expressing our culture in need—beloved by God, but *not* itself God.

Such a countercultural stance may be assisted by preaching being also *cross-cultural*. If images and rhetoric belonging to other localities are sometimes carefully borrowed to speak of the grace of God *here*, preaching will also have a certain distance from "here," will bring to expression in the local community the wider, catholic communion between the churches. Indeed, the very use of biblical texts, from other times and places, and the insertion of those texts within the ancient *ordo* of the church—also arisen and elaborated in other times and places as a way that historical events are spoken into present meaning—can form the basic model for the cross-cultural work of the preacher. A North American preacher may be able to express more profoundly what the Scripture actually means in North America if she or he also knows something

[14] "Wenn ich eine Predigt tue, so mache ich eine antithesin," quoted in Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 50.

[15] Karlfried Froelich, "Tropologia: Hearing the Truth," unpublished paper, 10.

of what has happened when texts have been translated into languages expressing the Asian or African sense of the ancestors, the Aboriginal Australian or Native American sense of the land, the European sense of society.

So the shape of the liturgy enables the dialogue between worship and culture. And the *ordo*-based characteristics or "shape of preaching" can respond to and participate in that dialogue as it is deeply formed by its location within the shape of the liturgy. And, vice-versa, preaching can invite us again into the ecclesial task, the *assembly* task, that belongs to the faith it both proclaims and enables.

Now, in our cultural moment, at this turn of the centuries, as we ask about "worship," the Scripture itself can help us. It can refresh us in the profound gifts of assembly, in the *ordo* of the gospels, in that preaching, meal, and sending which belong to all the people of Christ. And it can show us how this *ordo* is to be set in critical dialogue with our own culture.

In the early fourth century, during one of the last and fiercest of the persecutions of Christians, a certain deacon named Emeritus was arrested for allowing Christians to meet together for the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day in his house. Asked by the magistrate why he did this illegal thing, why he was so foolish and careless of his own life, he responded, "We cannot live, we cannot *be*, without it."[16]

There is our answer. Why gather? Why do the old *ordo*? Why preach? Because, if we want to be Christians—"sarcophilic Christians"—in dialogue with our own cultural surroundings, loving and honoring the conditions of the flesh but waiting only upon God for grace and hope, we cannot live, we cannot *be*, without it.

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[16]The answer of Emeritus was *sine dominico non possumus*. Text in Willi Rordorf, *Sabbat und Sonntag in der Alten Kirche* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), 79.

Book Reviews

Christianity for the Twenty-First Century. Edited by Philip F. Esler. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998. x and 278 pages. Paper.

Perhaps a more appropriate title for this book would be "Christianity at the End of the Twentieth Century," as the contributors ponder the current state of Christianity in regard to various issues. This book, a smorgasbord of eleven essays, is the result of a conference of Scottish academics and teachers held in Edinburgh in 1995. Nine scholars tackle the big eight religious issues of the century, namely Christianity in regard to science, secular humanism, Marxism, ethics, poverty and riches, women, ecology and environment, and war and peace.

This is not the kind of book that should be read from cover to cover. Its topics are much too diverse, each chapter being independent from the next. Rather, its value is in picking out a particular theme and looking at its current state, which is discussed in depth. Each essay has a rather extensive list of references and suggestions for further reading. Within the text, examples are somewhat geographically grounded, mainly drawn from the U.K., with some from the U.S.A. An example of one topic heading reads, "What sort of liberation theology might be appropriate in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s?"

The editor, Philip Esler, has attempted to package the essays together by enclosing them between his introductory chapter, "Introduction: Christianity for the Twenty-First Century" and the concluding chapter by Timothy Gorringe, "After Christianity?" The essays do search for honest answers to the questions raised.

As with most books with numerous contributors, writing styles vary. Some chapters are easier reading than others. It is not uncommon for James Mackey in his essay, "Christianity: Critiques and Challenges," to create sentences that take up more than one third of a page!

If you are looking for a prophetic book that predicts what Christianity will be like in the twenty-first century, this is not the book for you. These essays only provide current indicators from which the reader may draw. As with many current books that refer to the millennium, it must be remembered that Gregory's calendar used by the West is far behind much of the world. For most of the East, the world is already well into the new millennium!

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Makers of Christian Theology in America. Edited by Mark G. Toulouse and James O. Duke. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997. 545 pages. Paper. $35.00.

Toulouse and Duke masterfully weave together ninety individual stories in order to tell one story, the story of Christian theology in the United States. The focus here is on the persons whose thought was formative for Christian denominations and for the broader Christian community (both at the core and the margins). After a general introduction by Toulouse and Duke, the book is divided into five fairly traditional time periods: Colonial (1607–1789), National (1789–1865), New Intellectual Frontier (1866–1918), Modern (1918–1965), and Recent (since 1965). Each of the first four time periods has the same format: an introduction by the editors followed by a series of three- to five-page historical sketches of significant persons. The sketches are written by a stellar collection of religious historians and theologians whose knowledge and writing skill are the strength of the work. The fifth and most recent era is reviewed in an essay by Martin E. Marty.

The goal of the work is breadth, not depth. Personalities from a spectrum of expressions are presented. Familiar names like Edwards, Emerson, and King are joined by lesser-known persons such as Lydia Child, Marcus Garvey, and George Florovsky. The editors are inclusive of male and female, Caucasian-American and Af-

rican-American, and other groups including Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witness, Deists, and Dewian humanists.

The nature of the work is thematic, not encyclopedic, and herein lies its greatest value. The introductory essays by the editors along with the thematic emphasis of the individual essays cause the book to come together as a whole. First, the reader is embraced by the rich diversity that is and has always been Christianity in the United States. Second, the reader comes away with a sense of the enduring themes of American Christian thought, with some thematic guideposts for understanding how the present context has formed, and with a historically informed perspective that may enable a more ecumenical and theologically balanced future. This book is worthy of any pastoral or church library. It could well be a text for college or general seminary courses in American Christian thought.

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The Structure of Christian Ethics. By Joseph Sittler. Introduction by Franklin Sherman. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, [1958] 1998. Paper. $14.95.

Westminster John Knox Press has done a favor for many of us who seek to serve the church with the republication of this important book. Written in 1958, this little volume began its literary journey as a chapter in the collection *Christian Social Responsibility*, Volume 3, "Life in Community." The purpose of this series, commissioned by the United Lutheran Church in America, was "to school Lutherans in the scriptural and confessional grounds for social action."

As Franklin Sherman tells us in the Introduction to this new printing, the central certainty for Sittler which grounds all social action is the "dual certainty of the reality of God and the primacy of Grace (x). Dr. Sherman's introduction gives the reader direction and insight into the broad themes of Sittler's text: the powerful insight of artists into the human situation, the organic nature of the God/human/creation relationship, and the two realms of our existence as Christians—the cloud of witnesses and the entire universe.

In an imitation of dramatic form, Sittler offers us the climax of his thought in the second chapter, "The Shape of the Engendering Deed." Sounding a theme which is intrinsic to Sittler's thought, he writes that the engendering deed is "used to assert that the organic relationship between God and man [sic] structured into existence in creation, incarnated into absolute involvement in redemption, persists and inwardly determines the realm of sanctification, that is, the field of Christian ethics" (25). Sittler draws the reader into this organic deed where God's determined will-to-restoration presses upon each of us.

Sittler challenges our lukewarm congregational ethics in which we call one another to love as Christ has loved. Love is but one of the terms which might describe the inner fire in the person and work of Jesus. The real content of God's work is revealed in the terms of faith. Taking his direction from St. Paul, Sittler writes, "Only faith is a large enough term to point to the total commitment of the whole person which is required by the character of the revelation [of God's self]" (46).

The second critical step in this chapter is the introduction of Sittler's understanding of Christology as functional. Jesus is the Christ because of what he does, not because of who he is. The words of Jesus are not "the legislation of love" as many of us may tell parishioners in our preaching. Sittler focuses our attention on the words of Jesus as paradigms of love, offered to us in a relational and living manner. In a functional Christology one cannot separate the words from the deeds of Jesus the Christ.

The final chapter of this brief work fleshes out the content of the "engendered response." Ethics are often described as the response to the act of Christ in the Resurrection. Returning to the understanding of the organic nature of God, he writes that Redemption cannot be separated from Creation. The frame of Christian ethics matures from the event and experience of the endlessly giving God, both at the beginning of time and in the movement towards its culmina-

tion. This is a theme to which he would devote entire works in the years following this particular project. A contingent line of thought is that Grace fulfills—not destroys—nature. Finally Sittler calls the Christian to understand that "The Christian ethical decision is generated between the two poles of faith and the facts of life" (74).

Joseph Sittler saw himself as a preacher of the Word. In this and other writings he invites preachers to participate in the struggle to find the true meaning behind the often overused and abused words of the church: faith, grace, and love.

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Rochester, Minnesota

Briefly Noted

The second century was a period of theological ferment in the early church, when alternative versions of Christianity were fire. **The Earliest Christian Heretics: Readings from Their Opponents** (Fortress, $24), edited by Arland J. Hultgren and Steven A. Haggmark, presents passages from the Greek and Latin fathers instructive about early Gnostics, Marcion, Montanus, and others. Organized according to rejected heresiarchs and movements, this sourcebook will be useful in courses in early church history and the history of Christian thought. The editors provide useful introductions to each citation, bibliographies for further study, and a good, brief general introduction. It deserves careful reading. *EK*

Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey by Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough (Baker, $44.99) is a very conservative introduction to the books of the New Testament enhanced with excellent color photographs, maps, and a CD-Rom disk containing video clips of biblical sites, still photos, and interviews with the book's authors. Traditional views attractively presented. *EK*

The Genesis of Doctrine. By Alister E. McGrath (Eerdmans, $25). This book, first issued under another publisher in 1990, provides a proposal for Christian identity in conversation with the past. M. engages and moves beyond the work of George Lindbeck, calling for a more historically careful reading of the formation, functioning, and reappropriation of Christian doctrine. He offers a fourfold interpretation of doctrine as (1) social demarcation, (2) interpretation of narrative, (3) interpretation of experience, and (4) truth claim. For those interested in the search for Christian identity, this book is a good read.

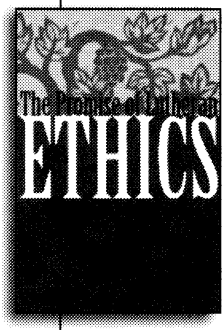
Phil Ruge-Jones

Alister McGrath's **J. I. Packer: A Biography** (Baker, $19.99) is a detailed, empathetic biography of this influential Anglican, one of the most important evangelical scholars of the twentieth century. Reading this volume will aid in understanding the person behind the books, the intellectual setting in post-World War II England, and the nuances in Packer's thought that separate him from less intellectual evangelicals. And, it's a good read. *EK*

Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work. By Charles E. Reagan (University of Chicago Press, $13). This book provides an excellent introduction to the significant contributions of this major twentieth-century figure. Among theologians and biblical scholars, Ricoeur is chiefly known for his careful reflections on hermeneutics. This volume places that concern within the context of his entire life and philosophy. The book concludes with some insightful interviews and a lengthy bibliography of major works by and about this teacher who spent much of his career at the University of Chicago. *CLN*

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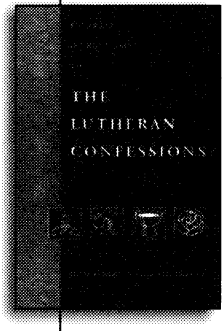


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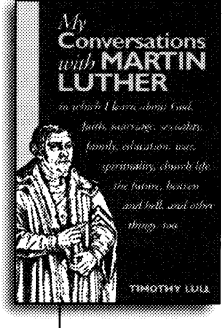
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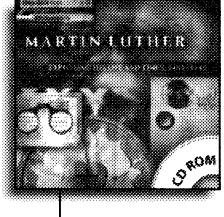


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Preaching Helps

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Thanksgiving Day
Series A

Ending Well

Ready or not, here we are at the end. In fact we are closing in on several ends: end of the church year, end of the calendar year, end of the century, end of the millennium (whether it's this December or next). Some of us feel twinges and aches in our bones and marrow which we read as distant (we hope) early warning signals of our personal end. At least insurance companies are betting that some of us are farther from the beginning and closer to the end.

Who was it who wrote that book, *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* I think it was Malcolm Boyd. Anyway, for the past many months we have been running with Matthew—or has Matthew been running with us? Think of Matthew's Gospel as a river carrying us along. Where does it want to take us? It is a Gospel that speaks often about "the end." And what it says about the end is not all golden streets and pearly gates. (We must turn to the Book of Revelation for a tour of the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven at the end.)

Matthew and Jesus in Matthew's Gospel seem fond of describing at least one aspect of the end with the phrase "outermost darkness" (the comparative serving as superlative) = a place that is farthest from the warmth and light of God's hearth and heart. It is a place where, instead of laughter and joy, there is "weeping and wailing and grinding of molars." Partly because of this repeated refrain (8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:5; 25:30) it is commonplace to think of Matthew as "more apocalyptic" than the other canonical gospels.

That description is not completely off the mark. It is worth noting that each of the five great discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel contains, near its climax, a paragraph with stunning images of the end. So the Sermon on the Mount concludes with talk of a storm (the eschatological storm?) pounding a house built on sand and another built on rock. The Mission Discourse (Matthew 10) climaxes with talk of being affirmed or denied by the Christ one has or has not confessed in life and of losing or not losing eternal rewards. The Parable Discourse (chap. 13) has those powerful images of angels at the end separating

the weeds from the wheat and the bad fish from the good. The Community Discourse (chap. 18) ends with that really stupid administrator enjoying the king's fabulous forgiveness (an amount like the national debt) and then pouncing on a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars. And the Eschatological Discourse (chaps. 24–25) gets its name from the piling up of images of the end which it contains: servants acting haughtily and selfishly in their master's absence, bridesmaids (called "wise" and "foolish" just like the house builders of chap. 7) ready or not ready for the coming of the bridegroom, servants who invest or bury talents.

And the totality of the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel comes to its climax in the final paragraph of the final discourse, where Jesus pulls aside the curtain from the future and begins to speak less parabolically and more directly. No more housebuilders, planters and weeders, fishermen, administrators, bridesmaids or investors. He speaks of the time when he will come and sit on his glorious throne (of judgment and rule) with "all the nations" gathered before him. He will separate them, as a shepherd separates sheep and goats. (That's still parabolic and symbolic, of course, but then he gets on with speech that is more direct, more prosaic, more literal.)

A series of six words rings four times through this amazing paragraph: "hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned." The judge of the world seems to be interested in nothing else. How did you treat the smallest and the least when they were "hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned"? Jesus does not say that the list is complete. But it is enormously suggestive.

One thing it suggests to me is that in Matthew's Gospel the word "end" is used in two ways. "End" is not only chronology. It is fundamentally teleology. When Matthew's Gospel speaks about "the end of the age" (*syn-teleia tou aionos*; 13:39,40,49; 24:3; 28:20), it is talking about the future. But it is also talking about living the present in light of the future, in the light and presence of the one who is the present and future judge.

Martin Marty in a recent issue of *Context* quotes Ceslaw Milosz, speaking about the old complaint that religion is opium for the people, a narcotic offered up to the oppressed as a deceitful substitute for any real change in their present situation. Milosz says that "we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium for the people is a belief in nothingness after death—the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders we are not going to be judged."

Matthew's Gospel, like the whole of Scripture, holds together God and morality, transcendence and our bodily life on planet earth. Jesus in Matthew's Gospel speaks about "end" in two senses: the chronological "end" of the world and the spiritual or ethical "end" of living. My sense is that Jesus is not really

trying to offer information about the "furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell." All the talk about "the end" in terms of future rewards or punishments is geared to undergirding moral, ethical and spiritual "ends."

At the climax of the Antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-48), Jesus calls out, "You shall be 'perfect' as your heavenly Father is 'perfect'" (5:48). The word for "perfect" is *teleios*, derived from *telos* = end or goal. The goal of human life is that we learn to love as God loves. And Jesus says that God does not love like human beings. God sends rain and sunshine on the just and the unjust, on both the good and the evil. God is not narrow or biased or childish, as we so often are. Jesus here cries out to us to "grow up" and "ripen" and "mature" (all ways of trying to see "goal" in that word *teleios*). He says in effect, "Become the grown up children of God." Finally that means to love our enemies. That is the "end" or goal that Jesus and Matthew are really interested in. That is the goal of discipleship. That is the place to which the river of the Gospel of Matthew would sweep us.

Helping us along to that goal are numerous contributors in this issue. Some time ago I approached John Rosenberg, erstwhile pastor of Saint Paul Lutheran Church in Vancouver, Washington. I invited him to write studies on these texts for the end of the Year of Matthew. He countered that he would be willing to ask the Portland (OR)/Vancouver (WA) Text Study group to participate together in producing the series. And that's what he has done. Nine pastors have produced these nine studies. Brief bios are appended to each of their studies. I describe John himself as "erstwhile pastor," since he resigned his call on July 31, 1999, shortly after submitting these pages. He assures me that his resignation had nothing to do with any form of misconduct, and I add that the pressure of writing these pieces was likewise no contributing factor! He is seeking a change, hoping to "figure out how to reconnect the Christian faith with a sacramental understanding of God's creation." He will be teaching history part time at a local community college and working on that project. My thanks to John and to his good colleagues for their efforts on behalf of all the rest of us.

My own homiletics professor in seminary, Richard Caemmerer Sr., used to say that preaching has faith goals and life goals. Faith and life are the "ends" of homiletics. I wish all of you "Good Preaching!" as you speak to those ends.

Yours,

Robert H. Smith, *Editor of Preaching Helps*
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
2770 Marin Avenue
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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 22 October 3, 1999

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:7-15
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

On the hill above my home sits a small vineyard. While you prepare this week's sermon, the owner will be counting down to harvest time. Ripe clusters of purple fruit weigh down the vines. The sound of his vineyard guns, timed to keep birds off the fruit, echo over the Lewis River Valley. Each day he is tasting the fruit and conducting another chemical analysis, too, to determine the sugar content and consequently the most suitable time to harvest. He has lined up workers to gather in the fruit, and he is looking skyward, hoping the winter rains will stay away long enough for him to bring in the harvest. Maintaining a vineyard is an all-consuming job—but Ah! the fruit of one's labor!

Rarely does the lectionary give us texts whose themes are so closely aligned as the ones for this day. Three center on a vineyard, yet each offers a different take on the image. Vineyards wind their way through both Testaments—in dreams, commandments, and prophetic oracles both of judgment and blessing (cf. Gen 40:1-15; Lev 19:10; Deut 24:21; Deut 31:30–32:47; Jer 2:21; Hos 10:1-2; 1 Kings 21).

Isaiah 5:1-7 is a song about beauty, nurture, betrayal, and tragedy. Like a country-western ballad, but shorn of sentimentality, it tells the tale of good love gone bad.

Verses 1 and 2 set the stage: the singer tells the tale of the "beloved's" vineyard, fertile, with good soil and drainage, cleared of stones, planted with choice vines, watched over, cared for, prepared in every way with expectation of an abundant harvest. But then (2b) the vineyard inexplicably yields wild grapes. In vv. 3-4 the song shifts its focus; now the audience is brought into the tale, as the Lord asks Judah itself to "judge between me and my vineyard." There are no cracks in the wall through which Judah can escape, no loopholes. What choice does Judah have but to pronounce judgment upon its very self? The force of the judgment is carried in a series of statements that express God's anger, like a lover betrayed: "I will tell you what I will do... I will remove its hedge... I will break down its wall... I will make it a waste... I will also command... no rain upon it." The future is bleak for this once-choice vine. Verse 7 concludes our text; the masks are removed, and the characters in this drama stand exposed. Nothing can shield them from the dismay, disappointment, and anger God feels. The covenant which called for a relationship of justice in daily life and righteousness in attitude and conduct has been abandoned by the people. Where is the hope in this song? It will have to come from some other source and time (cf. Zech 8:9, 11-12).

Psalm 80 brings us to the vineyard again, only this time the lament belongs to Israel and is addressed to God. This psalm is Israel's entreaty, her plea, her song, as if responding to the events Isaiah foretold which have now come true. This lament is punctuated three times by the plea: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved," each time with growing intensity. Beginning at first with a shepherd image in v. 1, the psalm shifts metaphors in vv. 8-18. Here, using the image of the vine, Israel reminds God of their long relationship together. If God had been tending to the relationship faithfully, then this never would have happened (v. 12). Like a neglected lover, Israel feels as if she has become invisible to God. She pleads for the now distant

God to "look down from heaven, and see" (v. 14). If there is to be any hope at all, any return to relationship, it depends upon the mercy of Yahweh. The juxtaposition of these two texts, Isaiah and Psalm 80, provide an opportunity to talk about faithfulness, loyalty, and accountability in faith relationships from both perspectives, and how the vocabulary of faith includes the full range of human emotion and circumstance.

The "Parable of Jesus' Rejection" (E. Schweizer) in Matthew 21 is the third of three Cycle A series lections in a row to be set in the vineyard. Today's lesson comes in the collection of Jesus' teaching occurring after his arrival in Jerusalem as son of David. Controversies between Jesus and his adversaries become more and more heated. Matthew's version of v. 34 is shorter and sharper than Mark's and Luke's: the owner sends slaves after "his fruit." The emphasis on fruit comes once again at the end of the parable (v. 41), when Matthew departs from Mark and Luke as he clarifies the owner's intentions to lease the vineyard specifically to tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.

Clearly this parable gets its "root stock" from Isaiah's love song. As in Isaiah, the story is told of careful preparation of "planting... fencing... digging... building." Next follows the deplorable conduct on the part of the vineyard tenants. Finally, the question of what is to be done is answered in Matthew's Gospel, as in Isaiah, by the representatives of Israel in an ironic self-indictment. The kingdom of God, "including the privileges and responsibilities of being God's elect people," passes in this parable from the chosen people into the hands of another "nation." The new metaphor of the stone (vv. 42 ff.) affirms the same conclusion by forcing the audience to a self-incriminating response.

This parable is about taking status for granted, about forgetting what sort of power meets us as we "go to church" on Sunday mornings. One rain, ill-timed, and the harvest revenue is halved. Miscalculations in the vineyard are more costly for the workers of the parable than they can imagine. Inheritance? The only entitlement is the one which comes at God's command; there is noting automatic here, only the mysterious mixture of God's intentions and human labor. How will it turn out? Things don't look good for the status quo. When any community, whether Israel or the church, forgets who the owner is and whose is the fruit for which we labor, we run the risk of rejecting the very one who has called us to life; we cut ourselves off from the vine (John 15).

The film *The Field*, based on a play by John B. Keane, is set in the 1930s in a small village on the rugged western shore of Ireland. The lives of Bull McCabe (age 60) and his son Tiggh (age 20) revolve around a single field which two generations of McCabes have transformed foot by foot by hauling seaweed up from the shore. What was once stony ground is now a verdant source of life and beauty. "God made the world, and seaweed made that field, boy," says Bull to Tiggh after they've hauled the latest load of seaweed up the cliffs on their backs. "Your father's father's father's father dug that soil with bare hands, built those rock walls. Our souls are buried down there. And your son's son's son's son will take care of it."

Yet in spite of this deep investment, Bull doesn't own the field. He rents it from a widow who, after ten years of living alone, decides to sell the three-acre field by public auction to the highest bidder. Everyone who lives in the village knows that the field "belongs" to Bull. He doesn't hesitate to make it clear that he expects no competition at the auction. But the appearance of a stranger threatens Bull's purpose. An Irish American man has returned to the land of his father

with plans to use the land for industry, and he is as committed to his vision as Bull is to his own. A series of confrontations with the American and the local priest drives Bull to the end of his rope.

Bull: Why are you interfering, Father? This is none of the church's business.

Priest: It's the widow's field; she has the right to sell it.

Bull: No, it's my field, it's my child. I nursed it, I nourished it, I saw to its every want, I dug the rocks out of it with my bare hands and I made a living thing of it. If you think I'm going to meet my mother in heaven or hell without that field, you got something else coming. No collar, uniform, or weapon will protect the man who stands in my way!

Despite the threats, the American is not intimidated. Bull, feeling his treasure slip away and brimming over with anger over his loss of control, kills the American. Bull's life unravels: his son breaks with him, and ultimately Tiggh, too, becomes a victim of his father's consuming rage.

Jesus' parable of the vineyard is about remembering whose field we are in and whose fruit we are working to produce. It is a hard lesson on entitlement. Israel, represented by Jesus' adversaries, has forgotten who the vineyard and the fruits of it belong to—God—and that the stakes of disobedience are high, higher than Israel can imagine.

Douglas Hare points out that this parable of the passion must be treated with great care by Christians. The history of Christianity bears witness to the ease with which this call for repentance has been turned into virulent anti-Semitism which is opposed to everything the cross of Christ represents. The parable may first be heard as a prophetic word directed by a Jew to fellow Jews. But its meaning is not then exhausted. What does the parable imply about Christians? All of us who have been called in baptism to work in the vineyard and to bear the fruits fitting for God's reign, will be held accountable. Being grafted into Christ, the true vine, entitles us to more gifts than we could ever have imagined. When we approach our new identity with humility, with the imitation of our Lord, then our lives will remain on firm soil. To forget who the vineyard belongs to is to forget who we are. Bringing the fruit to the Table, celebrating God's presence as fruitful harvest from fruitful vineyards, eating and drinking "in remembrance" of him who gave himself and keeps on giving himself for our sake, these are the spiritual disciplines that allow us to keep our relationship with God clear and in focus. EK

—Erik Kindem is a graduate of Luther Northwestern Seminary (1985) and has served the church in Native American ministry in northwest California, at Holden Village, and in parishes in Portland, Oregon, and LaCenter, Washington, his current call.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 23 October 10, 1999

Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

First Reading

The wedding guest parable (Matthew 22) is about gratitude to a graceful God. How graceful is God? Graceful enough to be like a king who did the unthinkable: he invited outsiders to a private wedding. Usual protocol called for a wedding giver to send out invitations to all his cronies, to those of status equal to his own. Invitations alerted those important folk to the event. But when preparations were complete, the invitees all turned to their everyday banalities. Had there been a preoccupying national disaster, their absence may have been excusable, but they were without excuse.

The king refused to let a good feast go to waste. Gracefully he sent out summons to people unequal to his social standing. The folk attending from the highways would not enhance the king's status, nor would they ever be able to return the favor. He stooped low in grace to include them.

But such grace cannot be taken advantage of, as one of the guests did. Fritz Kunkel tells us that ancient kings gave jewels and costly garments to those who came to weddings. To dress in the gifted white garment was to publicly acknowledge the beneficence of the king, and that meant acknowledging reliance upon one's patron. One guest failed to wear the wedding garment. By not wearing it he maintained his autonomy and preserved his pride. He symbolized all those moments when we ignore the graceful ways of God and thereby turn away from relationship with God. All of us from time to time leave the richness of the banquet for our own starvation diet of isolated individualism.

Isaiah 25 is a burst of gratitude. This text includes an ancient victory hymn celebrating the destruction of an enemy city. There is no obvious correlation here to the history of Jerusalem. But that silenced enemy city signals that Yahweh will silence the noise of the arrogant and the clamor of the violent. Certain of this gift of the future, our calling is to live proleptically. The Eschaton has already begun with the resurrection and our forgiveness. We are hope-filled for the final day when all our security will be complete. Grateful confidence in the future results in works of mercy in the present.

Philippians 4 has those familiar words we called the "votive" in some liturgical assemblies: "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Our need is for God's good guardianship. Barth reminds us that when we leave God's guardianship we become open to every enemy and every danger. And we leave that guardianship when we do not give thanks. Gratitude, again, is a reminder to ourselves that God first called us into relationship. And when we are aware that God is immanent we are more available to God so God can be strength and help in every trouble. Gratefully aware of God's presence, we then do godly things. In the Philippian context, Paul hopes that Euodia and Syntyche will soon reconcile. And relationship in God is also the reason why the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul.

Pastoral Reflections

This is a good day for the preacher to proclaim a theology of the meal. The wedding feast in Matthew and the hymn in Isaiah remind us that a garden may have been our

origin but a banquet hall is our destiny. We Lutherans pride ourselves on our potlucks and hot dishes. The preacher can remind us that whenever we gather for festive meals (and especially as we celebrate weekly Eucharist) we proclaim the grand feast that awaits us on the last day.

Philippians 4:3 suggests a homiletical exploration of the Book of Life. Daniel and the Revelation to John reference this book tradition. It becomes actual in rites of enrollment in the catechetical process. This might be a good day to inaugurate and explain such a book for the local congregation's outreach process.

Stewardship emphases usually occur in the Fall, and this Sunday's emphasis on gratitude for beneficence makes it an especially appropriate day for a stewardship theme. Stewardship follows so naturally from the three articles of the creed. God the Father creates and possesses all; we are tenants and stewards entrusted with the creation. God the Son gives life to guarantee forgiveness and the presence of God. In gratitude for the gift of the Son we too learn to give self-sacrificially. God the Holy Spirit creates us anew and sometimes teaches us to do things that do not come naturally. We pray for the gift of gratitude in order to give more responsibly.

Perhaps the theme most worthy of exploration is that gratitude draws us more deeply into relationship with God. Where relational ties are strong, the opportunities for healing and strengthening are stronger. I remember a story of how gratitude transformed a family. Year after year they drove across mountain ranges and the great plains to visit grandma and grandpa in the Midwest. The family's awareness of geographic distance at each vacation's end was very painful. The family tried to avoid some of this pain by engaging in one of those unwritten rituals that families often do: they did not say good-bye. On the morning of departure grandpa stayed in his room and grandma packed sandwiches. The family just loaded themselves in the car and were despondent until at least Wyoming. But one year a bold teenage daughter decided to do things differently. "Stop the car!" she shouted as they were halfway down the long driveway. She bolted from the back seat, ran to her grandma, and embraced her tightly. "Thanks for the stay, grandma." The departure still hurt, the miles were long, and summer sun was still hot on the car windows. But a feeling of gratitude for the gift received began to replace the feeling of sadness over the time having come to an end. Gratitude spurred more trips home and made them a closer family than before.

Augustine said that pride is the root of sin; Ignatius said it was ingratitude. Autonomy is part of what went wrong in Genesis 3. But gratitude helps us see our dependency on God and interdependency with one another. Gratitude transforms each day because through it we depart from a "what's in it for me" view and instead learn to tend to whatever is in our care. Gratitude here and now anticipates the last day when the Christ will be fully revealed and the cosmos wholly restored. MM

—Michael Meranda lives in Troutdale, Oregon. He teaches part time at Marylhurst University and is awaiting a call in the Oregon Synod. He has served a multiethnic parish in Seattle's inner city, a campus ministry in urban Portland, and a "dissenting" LCMS parish near the downtown of St. Paul, Minnesota. He has been active in community service and in liturgical renewal.

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 24 October 17, 1999

Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96:1-9 [10-13]
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

"Be a patriot, kill a priest" was a street slogan in El Salvador during the last decade. With the assassinations of priests in Central America including Archbishop Romero and six Jesuits, the question of allegiance to the emperor and to God takes on life and death proportions. In May of 1997 I visited El Salvador including some of the sites of these assassinations. The question of church and state came into clear focus for me there.

The clash of kingdoms Jesus precipitates by his coming into the world is inevitable. The ways of God are not human ways. The ways of human emperors wanting to be divine are not the ways of the divine Christ fully human. According to Matthew, Herod ordered all the boy babies of Bethlehem to be killed in a desperate attempt to destroy Jesus before he could even get started with his kingdom preaching (2:16f.). It should hardly come as a surprise, then, when the Herodians and the Pharisees come together in Matthew 22 forming a political/religious/economic alliance against Jesus and the Project of God he presents, the same project which the church now claims as its own.

The tension between the ways of the world and the ways of God is not new. Hebrew midwives obeyed God rather than Pharaoh. Isaiah offered God's new thing, which is above human thought, turning upside down the most reasonable of expectations: a foreign, pagan king will be God's anointed one (Messiah)!—simply because "I am the LORD, and there is no other" (Isa 45:5a, 6b).

The Herodians and Pharisees come together in Matthew's concluding chapters to trap Jesus. The term *pagideuein* is rare in Greek and appears only in our text (22:15). It is a hunting term meaning to "ensnare" or "entrap." The aggressive insincerity, yet sly and oily, is matched only by Jesus' ability, for the time being, to fend off his opponents with clever response. He is aware of their malice and exposes his questioners' hypocrisy.

Jesus' response to the query on taxes, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" is threefold. First he asks them to show him a coin, which they do. This uncovers their hypocrisy already, for the coin they produce is a silver denarius minted expressly for paying the tax. That they have it and Jesus doesn't exposes the insincerity of the questioners. Second, Jesus asks about the icon and inscription. Whose are they? They answer, "the emperor's." On one side of the coin would have been the emperor's likeness bearing some intimation of divinity. On the other side would be words of propaganda promising peace or prosperity in the name of the emperor and his rule. Again by their own answer they have shown whose coin it is. Finally Jesus delivers the saying which is at the heart of his reply, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." To this they have no reply. Only amazement, and they go away.

The tension of the question and Jesus' answer, however, rings through the ages. What claims can the emperor make? What claims can only God make? The conflict of church and state, spiritual and political, the project of God and the projects of humans are not dissipated by Jesus' clever words. The competing claims of conflicting demands in our souls and in our society ring loudly: tax and/or tithe? military draft and/

or Christian mission? submission to civil law and/or civil disobedience?

During the Vietnam war, and in other wars, many chose to obey the emperor and went to war when drafted. Others chose differently: flight to Canada, burning draft cards, hiding, conscientious objection, changing identity, or seeking legal deferments. How does one discern the things of God and the things of the emperor in such a situation? During the Cold War buildup of nuclear arms in the late seventies, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen spoke at our regional church assembly. He challenged us to pray and fast one day per week for peace, and to withhold the portion of our taxes which paid for weapons. At that time approximately 40% of the federal budget was military related. The first part I did for twenty years. The second I seriously considered for four years before finally, mostly through lack of courage, continuing to pay the full tax.

In today's America we have no emperor, but we have powerful forces pressing us hard. A local priest in our church-based organization recently reflected on the market culture, that conglomeration of media, marketing, and entertainment which is a central part of the American and global empire. He asked, "What does the market culture want from the churches?" Here's a partial list:

What does the emperor want?
Blessing of *status quo*
Silence of all criticism
Service and mercy
Stay in the "spiritual" realm
Pay taxes
Permission to dominate earth
Unlimited consumption

What does God want?
Blessing or curse, depending upon impact on the poor
Prophetic voices
Service, compassion, and justice
"Spiritual" is holistic
Stewardship of all resources
Mend the earth
Sustainability and justice

It may seem a far cry from North American culture to El Salvador's "Be a patriot, kill a priest," yet the complications are nearer than we might imagine. The internal debate within each Christian soul, but also within the Christian community, about what is the emperor's and what is God's, and how we live with the consequences, is a vital, difficult, and potentially explosive conversation. How can we assist one another in the discernment of the amazing, surprising ways of God which are both hidden and revealed in the ways of the world? Also critical is a wise-as-serpents-but-innocent-as-doves encounter with the world once a discernment has been made. God grant us wisdom and courage for such discernment and action. TAM

—Terry Allen Moe has been pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, a multicultural community in northeast Portland, for eighteen years. He is a leader with a community organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation. He recently completed a Doctor of Ministry project at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., that explored the connections between spirituality and justice.

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25 October 24, 1999

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Psalm 1
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

First Reading

Our readings this Sunday open with a call to holiness, to life beyond all flaws and brokenness. The Holiness Code of Leviticus instructs the Israelites to "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Here we find the basis for Matthew's second commandment, as God instructs the people of Israel to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Why? "I am the Lord." And God provides examples of holy life in community: render fair judgments, do not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, do not bear grudges or slander others. Get things out in the open. Act justly, lovingly. By this you will be holy, you will demonstrate that you are people of God.

Psalm 1 rejoices in "the law of the LORD," emphasizing that to follow the way of the LORD results in a blessing. Delighting in "the law of the LORD" results in prosperity like trees planted by streams of water, yielding their fruit in season. The wicked, however, are like the chaff that the wind drives away—without roots, without grounding. We may hear "law" as a series of rules or demands, as that which when contradicted brings punishment or judgment. Psalm 1 reminds us of the *goodness* of God's order, of the abundance and health that comes from having firm roots, good nourishment.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonian community also gives guidance about community relations: "we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others.... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us." How much better are we received when we come *gently* among people, sharing not only God's good news but our very selves?

Matthew provides the essence of God's will for our lives, how we are to live. Jesus responds to the test of a lawyer, one of the Pharisees, first with the familiar Shema (Deut 6:4-5), "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Hear, O Israel! Jesus follows this commandment with a second that is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." These commandments are related, similar, as our love of God is intrinsically connected to how we treat our neighbor, how we treat ourselves. Our love of God is connected to how we live in community, as a family, congregation, neighborhood, people.

And finally, asserting his authority to the Pharisees who would test him, Jesus turns the question back to the Pharisees, asking what they think of the Messiah. In Jesus' response, that the Messiah is more than the son of David, he points us back to God, the ultimate authority, whom we love with all our hearts and souls and minds.

Pastoral Reflections

I spent two years working in Washington, D.C. (through Lutheran Volunteer Corps) at Sarah House, a post-treatment residential program for homeless women recovering from substance abuse. Many of the women hadn't experienced much love, either receiving or giving love. Much of what we did at Sarah House had to do with love—loving God, loving neighbor, loving self. That meant

learning to speak honestly with the other women in house meetings, learning to work through disagreements without screaming or name-calling or violence. It meant sitting with and walking with and talking with each other, through pain and joy. It meant facing years of pain without the help of drugs or alcohol. It meant learning respect—for each other, for oneself.

Sarah House had a lot of rules, and many of the rules didn't go over well with the women, particularly the "no relationships" rule. We strongly encouraged the women to wait until they had several months of sobriety and stability before becoming involved in a romantic relationship. The women were like all of us, often becoming totally focused on every detail of each rule: trying to slip through loopholes, trying to prove who *wasn't* following the rule properly, trying to follow the letter of the law without minding the spirit of the law. A woman would try to demonstrate why she should be an exception to a particular rule. All laws have exceptions, and we are often quick to point how many of the laws in the Holiness Codes of Leviticus are from a long-past era. Which do we follow and which do we release? What does it mean today, in this culture and context, to be holy as God is holy? to set ourselves apart as people of God?

I watched these women at Sarah House, set apart so that they might heal and grow strong. I accompanied them as they worked, struggled, and made mistakes, and as they kept coming back again and again. I watched as they learned to love—themselves, each other, a Higher Power. They learned to love in ways that were concrete and practical: Be gentle. Share of yourselves. Care for others as you would for your own children. Do not take advantage of neighbors. Speak well of them. Do not take vengeance or hold grudges. Get your grievances out in the open. This learning to love resulted in hope and new life. Women grew like trees finally rooted beside a life-giving river, bearing fruit, growing roots strong enough to keep them from being blown away like chaff.

Jesus' emphasis is on relationship: a full, healthy relationship with God, an involved relationship with our neighbors, and caring attention to our own lifestyles. To love God is to love our neighbor, to love what God has created, to love ourselves. The relationship is always horizontal *and* vertical. Like the cross. SMH

—Susan M. Halvor has traveled a lot, from the Oregon Coast to Washington, D.C., to Latin America and Southeast Asia. She interned at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Vancouver, WA, and is completing her M.Div. at PLTS in Berkeley, CA.

Reformation Day
October 31, 1999

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

First Reading

Not surprisingly, the heart of each lesson for Reformation Day is the good news that relationship with God (also spoken of as "covenant" and "freedom") is not something that we have to create as part of our general effort to "make something of our self." Rather relationship, covenant, and freedom come to us as pure gifts, generated by the grace of God and received by faithfully trusting God's mercy.

In chapter 31, Jeremiah speaks a word of hope to the people of Judah who are in the midst of national destruction brought upon them by the Babylonian empire. Three times in chapter 31 a saying begins, "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD" (31:31-34;

cf. 27-30, 38-40). In vv. 31-34, God promises a day when God will make a new covenant with Israel/Judah and restore them to the land. Notice that the phrase in v. 32, "though I was their lord," could also be translated "though I was a husband to them" (baal = husband or lord). Like Hosea, Jeremiah uses the intimacy of marriage imagery to describe God's relationship with Israel, both here and in chapter 3.

After numerous attempts by the prophets to woo, badger, or jolt the people of Israel to again turn to the Lord, this reading suggests that God sees the people as incapable even of repenting and turning on their own. Therefore God not only offers the covenant as a gift but also graces Israel with the will and power to accept it. "I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (v. 33).

Paul opens his letter to the Romans by first indicting the Gentiles (chap. 1) and then the Jews (chap. 2) for being out of relationship with God, despite their efforts and "systems" for success. All seems lost, but in an amazing turnaround (beginning in 3:20), Paul proclaims that God makes things right by offering right relationship (righteousness) to us as a free and gracious gift. The gift is ours when we, in faith and trust, accept it.

In John 8, "covenant" and "right relationship" are now expressed with the images of "freedom" and "children of Abraham." By the time of John's Gospel, the Christian community was in an end-stage conflict with the synagogue. Jewish Christians were no longer welcomed to worship in the synagogue, and the argument was over who were the true children of Abraham, i.e., members of the family of God. The choice was between the word of the Law and the word of Jesus, who came as the one "full of grace and truth" (1:14). The Jewish opponents of Jesus show amazing selective memory in saying, "We have never been slaves to anyone," considering their history with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome.

Pastoral Reflections

Like Pilate asking, "What is truth?" we postmodern Americans are both cynical and naive about the truth. After a year of presidential hearings, many of us believe that our political and justice systems conceal as much as they reveal about the truth. "Spin-doctors" and "wagging the dog" are part of our vocabulary. Yet we still find our hopes for the good life aroused by the latest Toyota ad, money manager brochure, or the promises of the latest health program. I am told that on the façade of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, VA, are the words, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

The question is, how are we captive and what will it take to free us? Are we captive to our fears? to ancient hurts and resentments? to our past? Are we captive to misplaced hopes and the shallow promises of our society? The license plates in Vermont preach, "Live free or die!" We would like to think that we have never been slaves to anyone, yet our daily experience is often one of being only half-alive and partially free.

The texts present another major question: Who are members of the covenant "family" (the children of Abraham), and what does it take to belong there? We all have our own lists of those who belong at the table and those who don't. Skin color, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation are still major dividing lines in our day. If psychology is right that my judgments of others are also my judgments towards myself, what part of *me* doesn't feel acceptable at the table either?

Fortunately, the One who comes with both searing truth and ultimate grace is also the One who makes up the guest list. RJ

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All Saints Sunday
November 7, 1999

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew's Gospel alternates narrative sections with teaching sections. Today's reading opens Jesus' first major teaching section in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). Here Jesus teaches followers (v. 1), in the context and overhearing of the wider society (5:1, 7:28), to "live right." The church word for this is "righteousness" (5:20), but what does it mean? It sounds moralizing and uptight. In Jesus' world of values, however, it means caring for people, not counting points. It means practicing strenuously gracious relationships along the lines of Jesus' own, indeed along the lines of God's (5:45-48). The beatitudes stand as the banner headline of all this teaching about right relationships.

These verses are called "beatitudes" from the Latin word beginning each one; the Greek is *makarioi*, and we say "blessed, happy, fortunate." One of the most interesting things I have turned up about the Greek speech form is that it was often used on epitaphs (Kittel). In other words, it could be the summary of a life. "Happy beloved husband and father." "Fortunate friend to all." "Blessed!" Jesus says, and it is a summary judgment from the Other Side, from the kingdom of heaven. What surprises is who the blessed are. If we were to start a hall of fame for people who've been especially blessed, average Americans would probably nominate the rich, the beautiful, the powerful, the famous, and the lucky (you know, those who get in car crashes, hang on comatose for two months, and wake up to discover they've won the lottery). When Jesus opens the envelope it names a lot of nobodies, people we would not automatically put in the category "blessed": the poor in spirit. People who are mourning. People who have no power, the meek. The desperate, people who are hungry and thirsty for things to be right, because in them and around them things are so wrong. People who deal in mercy and purity and peace. And those who are persecuted and blamed and shamed for trying to take a stand with God in this world.

"Blessed" is not a random accident, nor is it just wishful thinking on Jesus' part. Behind the word "blessed" is a divine Blesser. This Blesser's word of blessing is performative, accomplishing what it names. "God blesses" the mourning, the meek, the marginal. It is essential to get the grammar right. Harry Wendt of Crossways describes two ways of transacting with God. "If/ then" depends on our initiative, as in "if I am good, God will bless me." This is the transaction we usually assume, and usually we are wrong. "Because/ therefore" depends on God's initiative, as in "because God freed the Hebrews from slavery/ therefore we will have no other gods." I believe the beatitudes are examples of "Because/therefore" covenanting on God's part: "Because God blesses those who mourn, they will be comforted."

The nine beatitudes are carefully crafted and composed. There are two stanzas, each containing exactly thirty-six Greek words marked by alliteration, and each with four beatitudes in third person. Then follows a rhythmically different ninth blessing in the second person.

I appreciate Mark Allan Powell's analy-

sis of the relationship among the beatitudes. The first four beatitudes, he insists, "speak of reversal of circumstances for those who are unfortunate. Contrary to popular homiletical treatments, being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness/ justice are not presented here as characteristics that people should exhibit if they want to earn God's favor." (Remember the divine grammar!) "Rather, these are undesirable conditions that characterize no one when God's will is done" (Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel* [Fortress, 1995], 128-30).

As for the second stanza, "the people whom Jesus declares blessed in 5:7-10 are those who help to bring to reality the blessings promised to others in 5:3-6." Powell continues, "'The merciful' are healers, people who seek to put right that which has gone wrong... the real accent in Matthew's sixth beatitude is on an integrity of virtue that is displayed on behalf of others... the peacemakers are agents of God who are actively establishing shalom... the virtue commended in the eighth beatitude is not persecution itself but the degree of investment that may be assumed for those so committed to God's cause that they are willing to suffer for it" (Powell, 130-36).

And finally, there is an "ironic connection between the stanzas," in that "those who practice the virtues described in the second stanza may on that account come to be numbered among those described in the first stanza on whose behalf these virtues are exercised" (p. 137). This mirrors precisely the experience of Jesus, God's suffering servant, it must be noted.

The ninth beatitude, stylistically different, brings the blessings home to the church. It's not "them out there" who suffer and strive; it's us. "The memory and hope of the Christian community of faith are grounded on the foundational narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Interwoven with this story are the stories of countless other women and men who have responded in vastly different ways to the Spirit's call to discipleship. In a particular way, the stories of the world's forgotten and unnamed resonate with the promise of the Crucified. Losing a sense of connections with these lives weakens the ability of the church to pass on gospel values and to empower the growth of constituted selves who live with 'habits of the heart' in free and caring relationships. Retrieving the symbol of the communion of saints would therefore contribute to a mature spirituality" (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets* [Continuum, 1998], 23).

And so, on All Saints Day, "that feast of splendid nobodies" (Johnson), in Christ we tell and cherish some of our stories of suffering and striving. We remember Ellen, the saint painfully crippled with rheumatoid arthritis for 30 years, who up until her death prayed for each member of the congregation by name each day from her sickbed. Because God blessed Ellen, the pure in heart, she saw God in us, and we knew God in her. We remember those who were hurt by Hurricane Mitch, those who died; because God blesses mourners, we want to comfort them, and we have sent quilts and money along with our prayers; is there more still to do? Always ("because God/ therefore we"), but never by ourselves— for not only is God-with-us in Christ Jesus, but so are the huge heavenly crowd "that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (first lesson, Rev 7:9), cheering us on. JB

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Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 28 November 14, 1999

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-8 [9-11] 12
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

As I prepare this text study, let me note that it's been that kind of week: with two people in two hospitals, a 91 year-old transitioning into a foster home, a funeral, confirmation instruction, a Council meeting; with deadlines for this article, my newsletter articles *and* federal and state tax returns; with remodeling going on at home, and conferences at school.... In other words, it's the kind of week one often has in the parish, and I end up planning my sermon on the fly—or in the middle of the night.

I open *Sundays and Seasons* (Augsburg Fortress, 1998), and I smile ruefully at the line from the psalm: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom" (90:12). My Lord, an excellent prayer in a week like this!

Zephaniah 1 speaks to us of "the day of the LORD," describing it as a "day of destruction of the LORD's enemies and of salvation for the LORD's faithful. This little-known prophet declares to the people of Jerusalem that sin without repentance will lead to destruction." (*Sundays and Seasons*)

I open the little-known prophet's book on my Oxford Bible computer program and read the whole chapter containing today's text. It's definitely more drastic than *Sundays and Seasons* hinted. "I will *utterly* sweep away *everything* from the face of the earth, says the LORD" (v. 2). What we have here is "a negation of creation," the Oxford annotation admits. Well, that verse is not part of our lectionary text. Maybe the faithful still have a chance? No. The last verse, which *is* in this week's lesson, pronounces, "A full, a terrible end [God] will make of all the inhabitants of the earth." Not much grace there, though a lot of deserving.

I try identifying myself and our community with the wealthy who are blasted by this seventh-century prophet, with those called to account perhaps just before the time of King Josiah's Deuteronomistic reform. In vv. 12-13 Zephaniah spits us out of the mouth. Neither hot nor cold (for we are betrayers who say, "The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm"), we are compared to fermenting wine that is never stirred, which becomes thick and weak. I acknowledge, I am thick and weak. We are. Let me count the ways.

For we perish at your wrath,
your anger strikes terror.
You lay bare our sins
in the piercing light of your presence.
—Ps 90:7-8

Truth-telling is always necessary but not sufficient for God's grace-giving. Will the Spirit take us farther than the first lesson? *(How long, O Lord, before you return?)* The second lesson (1 Thessalonians 5) urges us to think of the day of Christ's return as a day of salvation. The text starts as grimly as Zephaniah's. Then Paul deliberately shifts the mood from judgment to promise in vv. 4-5: "But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness." This "but" is a glorious, saving exception, God's doing and free gift! It is not the result of my vigilance. Yet let my own vigilance become the fitting response.

I pause to puzzle over Paul's use of "asleep." The word appears in two places: "So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (vv. 6-7).

"For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him" (vv. 9-10).

You have been our haven, Lord,
from generation to generation.
Before the mountains existed,
before the earth was born,
from age to age you are God.

—Ps 90:1-2

Matthew 25:14-30 is the second of three parables concerning the second coming of Jesus. It seems to urge us to use wisely the gifts that God has given us. That's not bad for openers, but we can go further.

Ched Myers and Eric DeBode, writing in *The Other Side* magazine (May and June 1999), suggest that this parable is a criticism of the world's mercenary economics. Since "the manner of profiteering portrayed in the story would have been understood by the original audience as rapacious, it [is] possible that this noncooperating third slave might in fact be the hero of this parable." The third slave becomes a 'whistle-blower' and meets a prophet's fate.

The slaves in this parable are upper-level management, entrusted with big bucks. The parable seems aimed especially at leaders of the Christian community. "The lesson is not new," he says. How are they doing? How is the system of which they are a part doing?

Robert Farrar Capon (*The Parables of Judgment*, Eerdmans 1989) comments: "It emphatically does not say that God is a bookkeeper looking for productive results. The only bookkeeper in the parable is the servant who decided he had to fear a nonexistent audit and who therefore hid his one talent in the ground.... We spend our lives invoking upon ourselves imagined necessities, creating God in the image of our own fears—and all the while, [God] is beating us over the head with the balloon of grace and the styrofoam baseball bat of vindicating judgment" (pp. 167, 169).

Life, with its weeks like this and worse, is the harsh master. Therefore might we bring to light and put to work even our few cents' worth of faith. The crucified one, hidden in the ground and cast into the outer darkness for us, has made us his investment. Will he not see to it that we rise, with him, with interest?

—*Joan Beck*

Pity your servants,
shine your love on us each dawn,
and gladden all our days.
Let your loveliness shine on us,
and bless the work we do,
bless the work of our hands.

—Ps 90:13b-14, 17

Christ the King
Proper 29
November 21, 1999

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 95:1-7a
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

First Reading

Today's readings announce the paradox of the faith: in the death of Jesus, the rejected one, the reign of God has come in all its fullness. This festival of Christ the King (or Reign of Christ) stands as an exclamation point to the entire year. The readings are both a culmination of the past year and a doorway into the coming one. On this last Sunday of the church year we see where the journey with Jesus leads: to the heart of God's passionate embrace of this world. We are in-

vited to join the embrace in all its fullness.

Our reading from Ezekiel comes into focus when we review the immediate context. In chapter 34 the word of the LORD pronounces judgment upon the rulers of Israel ("shepherds" as they came to be called). They have failed to shepherd the sheep while at the same time they have preyed off the flock to provide for themselves (v. 3). The indictment against Israel's leaders continues in v. 4 citing abuse of their institutional power toward the weak, the poor, the crippled, the strayed, and the lost. Instead of care and attention toward their charge, Israel's shepherds indulged themselves and exercised harsh, even violent, leadership.

The rulers have misused and abandoned their calling. As a result the community has been scattered or devoured, or the sheep have wandered off the face of the earth with no one to search for them or feed them. Therefore God now stands in judgment against them and will hold them accountable, remove them from leadership, and rescue the community (vv. 5-10).

Within this context our abridged reading for the day comes as a word of hope for recovery and restoration. God promises to intervene directly to rescue and provide for the care and nurture of the flock. God will accomplish this restoration of Israel as a great gathering from all the corners of the earth. This promise includes social, economic, and political security (their own land with good pasture and abundant food, vv. 11-15). This vision announces a dramatic social reordering through the exercise of leadership that embraces those who were abandoned—the lost, strayed, crippled, and weak—while also adding a commitment to supervise the powerful and to nurture them with justice (v. 16).

Verses 20-24 extend the metaphor of the sheep, continuing to announce judgment upon the wealthy and powerful for taking advantage of the weak and vulnerable. New is the promise to establish a ruler in the Davidic tradition. He will reign as servant-king. Attention to the verbs in this passage will confirm the character of the Shepherd as a true servant.

Ephesians, a letter of the "Pauline school," draws upon the themes and language of Colossians. Building upon the hymn of thanksgiving and praise for God's cosmic plan (1:3-14), verses 15-19 function as a prayer that the community will embody and live out God's grand design revealed in the cosmic Christ (vv. 20-23).

Our Matthew text is the familiar passage of the Great Judgment from chapter 25 wherein the prophetic tradition is recalled, especially the judgment of Ezekiel 34. The people of Jesus' day, like those in the history of Israel who preceded them, understood and could easily relate to this reference to sheep and goats. These animals were the primary source of wealth for the community. They were gathered together for herding during the day but separated for shearing and for sale at the market. And they were separated each night, because goats needed to be sheltered to keep warm. This same practice can still be seen today throughout the Middle East.

The Matthean Jesus refers to this common shepherding practice in order to bring into focus again the proclamation of the kingdom of God. We tend to think that kings and kingdoms are a thing of the past, but the power of the metaphor remains alive and well within our culture. Consider the primary title which continues to refer to Elvis Presley. Kings may be a political anachronism, but if we talk about "The King" we all know we are near to "Graceland." In his book *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, Norman Perrin highlights "kingdom of God" as central to the teaching of Jesus in this way: "Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the

Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it. The challenge to discipleship, the ethical teaching, the disputes about oral tradition or ceremonial law, even the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins and the welcoming of the outcast in the name of God—all these are to be understood in context of... Jesus as the Proclaimer of the Kingdom of God."

The Great Judgment announces that "God's Kingdom Community" (Paul D. Hanson, *A People Called*) stands in radical contrast to the self-serving ways in which we so often organize ourselves. The naming of the "least of these" in Matthew 25 and the entire story parallels the list and challenge found in Ezekiel 34. Just as the prophet spoke God's word of judgment upon the rulers for their failure to exercise servant leadership, so too there is judgment upon those who believe they are part of the kingdom but do not themselves practice God's justice (Ezek 34:16) which is the nature, mark and measure of "God's contrast community" (Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*). This Kingdom Community finds its life given to it in its baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, the King. But how does he reign?

To claim that Jesus is King is to engage in divine irony, for Jesus is no king and never was, in the sense that he exercises no reign the world would recognize. Finally Jesus is reduced to standing with us and crying out for God on the cross. In his death he stands with all "the least of these" who have been scattered and devoured and abandoned. The cross is his only throne and it is there, on the cross, where he reigns. Christ is King in and through his suffering and death on the cross.

It is here in this Word proclaimed and enacted that Jesus, the lamb who was slain with arms outstretched on the cross, embraces, gathers, feeds us all. There on the cross he executes justice and so fulfills God's cosmic plan to unite all things in Christ. We are witnesses to this rule and participate in this reign when we join the Crucified and Risen One in reaching out to "the least of these."

—Brian 'Red' Burchfield
Central Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

Thanksgiving Day November 25, 1999 (U.S.A.)

Deuteronomy 8:7-18
Psalm 65
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
Luke 17:11-19

First Reading

The Book of Deuteronomy is a series of speeches by Moses to the people of Israel, still in the wilderness, prior to their crossing over the Jordan River to take possession of the land. Keeping that setting in mind helps to make sense of this text in which Moses expounds on the riches of the "good land" into which God is bringing the people. Moses describes the land as abundant in water, rich in crop land, offering a bounty of bread and mineral resources. Sound familiar? The people, in turn, are admonished not to forget God "by failing to keep his commandments, ordinances, and statutes." This is primarily a law book, after all. Interestingly, remembering God's blessing in the wilderness, remembering where they came from (slavery in Egypt), keeping the law, and the abundance of the land are all related. The section comes to a climax in verse 17: "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" In a land of plenty, the people's eyes are directed

toward God, the source of all good gifts, including life itself.

The second reading is part of Paul's pitch to the congregation at Corinth to participate in the offering on behalf of the saints in Jerusalem. In chapter 8 Paul has already worked very hard to motivate them to be just as generous as the churches of Macedonia, whose "extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity" (8:2). He has also appealed to their sense of fairness (8:13,14), and to his own and their humiliation if they fail to deliver a generous "voluntary gift." Now, refusing to leave any rhetorical appeal untried, Paul promises that, as a result of their generosity, "you will be enriched in every way." The result is that not only will the saints in Jerusalem be helped (v. 12), but there will be "many thanksgivings to God" (v. 12), God will be glorified (verse 13), the church will be united (v. 14), and a powerful witness will be made to God's "indescribable gift" of grace in Jesus Christ (v. 15). In their generous offering, others will be able to see God's generosity.

The story from Luke is familiar. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. He is approached by ten lepers, keeping their distance as the law demands, who cry out their own version of *kyrie eleison*. In addition to the physical devastation of leprosy, sufferers are cut off from the rest of the community because they are "unclean." Luke's Jesus can never resist an opportunity to reach out to the unclean and the ungodly. Perhaps they are counting on that. At any rate, he tells the ten to "Go and show yourselves to the priests" as the law in Leviticus 13 demands. The realization of healing comes as they are on their way. The Samaritan (presumably the others are Jews) realizes what has happened, responds by "praising God with a loud voice," and returns to thank Jesus. He senses that these three actions—being healed, praising God, and thanking Jesus—are all connected to one another. Jesus' response is to wonder why the other nine did not also return and "give praise to God" but only "this foreigner." The verb for being "made well" can also mean "to rescue or save."

Pastoral Reflections

Thanksgiving has always been my favorite holiday. The combination of gathering not only with family but also friends, the richness of the land embodied in a wonderful feast, the changing of the seasons from fall to winter, and the chance for a day off in the middle of the week before the onset of the madness of Christmas is a wonderful gift. Because Thanksgiving is a national holiday rather than a liturgical one, expectations in our part of the world (the Pacific Northwest) are low. Many churches don't have services at all while others offer ecumenical or interfaith celebrations which frequently focus on raising up the needs of the poor and homeless and, like Paul, challenging the community to respond. Can we theologians of the cross speak a meaningful word in this situation using the readings for the day?

The reading from Deuteronomy is a particularly apt one in the American West where the mythology of the rugged individual on an "errand in the wilderness" stands in utter contrast with the historical reality that the West was settled only because of the largesse of the federal treasury, the community traditions that people brought with them from elsewhere, and at great expense to both the "good land" and the indigenous people of the region. It wouldn't hurt to tell the truth about all this, lest our people continue to delude themselves with the mistaken notion that "My own power and my own hand have gotten me this wealth."

Paul's insistence that our own generosity is a witness to God's prior "indescribable gift" of grace in Jesus Christ is a good word at a time when many of the middle-class

folks in our congregations are motivated to share their wealth with the poor. The memory of our origins—"slaves in Egypt" (Deuteronomy) and "not much by human standards" (1 Corinthians)—can offer a counterpoint to the tendency to be patronizing about all this. Like the ten lepers in the story, all of us were once cut off and find ourselves here today only because we've been "healed" by Jesus.

Finally, for those preaching in ecumenical or interfaith settings, Fred Danker in his study of Luke points to the fact that in today's lesson it was a "foreigner" who recognized the source of healing. This implies that "goodness is to be appreciated and encouraged wherever it is found. God's people do not have a monopoly on it." JR

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