

THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

TOGETHER BOUND

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 482

A COMMUNITY JOURNEY:
SHAPING GOD'S PEOPLE FOR LIVES OF FAITH AND FAITHFUL SERVICE



Bishop Michael Pryse writes...

This essay draws upon images from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymn 482, I Come with Joy, with text by Brian Wren and music from William “Singing Billy” Walker’s *Southern Harmony*.

Together

I come with joy, a child of God, forgiven, loved and free,
the life of Jesus to recall in love laid down for me,
in love laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love in Christ’s communion bread,
in Christ’s communion bread.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 482, stanzas 1 & 2*

It is no accident that when the early Christians looked for a word in their own language (Greek) to describe their worship of God they turned, not to cultic and priestly language, but to the language of civic responsibilities where they found the word “*leitourgia*” —the peoples’ work. The liturgy is an event where in the people of God, together, fulfil their primary responsibility as citizens in the kingdom of God, offering worship and praise to God.

In its primary form, worship is a corporate act, a “together” act. The gathered assembly, the coming together of God’s people, is all-important. In that event, we are reminded that God wants to relate to *a people* rather than simply to *persons*. “Where two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of them.” The Christian assembly is collectively called to gather, hear the Word, pray, offer gifts, receive communion, be blessed and sent forth to mission in God’s world.

One of the essential tasks of any family unit is that of giving its members a shared sense of identity, a sense of who they are. Similarly, one of the essential tasks of

our church family is to tell us who we are; to nurture and sustain the baptized in their common, God-given identity.

Hopefully, that is what we are doing and saying through our words and ritual action each Sunday morning. "Rise and go, your sins are forgiven." "The peace of the Lord be with you always." "The body of Christ given for you; the blood of Christ shed for you." "Go in peace, serve the Lord." We're affirming and building up that which Christ says we are. We're experiencing and practicing concretely, precisely those gifts and virtues which have been identified as being signs of the kingdom of God.

Christians are shaped and formed in community. From this perspective, faith can never be seen as some self-generated act of affirmation, but rather as a gradual entrance into a divinely inspired set of communal assumptions that surround us. Just as we are gradually socialized into the prevailing ways of the society in which we live, so also, are we socialized into the life of faith. The primary locus of that work of socialization is the Christian liturgy.

Bound

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends.
The love that made us, makes us one, and strangers now are friends,
and strangers now are friends

The Spirit of the Risen Christ, unseen, but ever near,
is in such friendship better known, alive among us here,
alive among us here.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 482, stanzas 3 & 4*

Through our shared experience of the liturgy we collectively experience that for which the people of God are bound — both for and together - the kingdom or reign of God. This is God's own work through the Word and Sacraments and although we may co-operate with this divine action, it is not something we do on our own. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*, "What we ought to realize, is that because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Christ Jesus long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life, not as demanders, but as faithful recipients."

In some ways, there is an element of pretense to our participation in the whole exercise. After all, there are days when I don't feel much like being a light to anyone, much less the whole world. There are days when my salt has lost much, if not all, of its taste! But just as there is a false or deceitful form of playacting where we have no intention of becoming what we pretend to be, there a very good and very holy kind of playacting where our faithful acts of pretense can carry us toward that for which we are bound.

Kierkegaard tells the story of a man whose face had been disfigured and made ugly, so much so that he felt obliged to wear a mask over his face, day in and day out over the course of many years. Finally one day, the mask was removed and much to the man's surprise, his features had now conformed to that of the mask. What had begun as a pretense had become a reality.

The church's liturgical calendar serves a similar function. In her book *Things Seen and Unseen* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1999), Nora Gallagher speaks of "living by a calendar that runs parallel to my Day-Timer: a counterweight, one time set against another. The church calendar calls into consciousness the existence of a world uninhabited by efficiency, a world filled with the excessiveness of saints, ashes, smoke, and fire; it fills my heart with both dread and hope. It tells of journeys and

mysteries, things 'seen and unseen,' the world of the almost known. It dreams impossibilities: a sea divided in two, five thousand fed by a loaf and two fishes, a man raised from the dead."

The liturgy whose rhythm is governed by that same calendar does likewise. It is the assembly wherein God's people experience the gifts and practice the virtues of that for which they are bound - the kingdom and reign of God. In the context of the liturgy, while our all too human differences, frailties and foibles remain, they are cast within a glow of ritual actions and words that can help us glimpse other truths that can carry us beyond the limits of purely surface realities. We are given a foretaste — a foreshadowing, if you will — of that which is yet to fully come.

To What End?

Together met, together bound by all that God has done,
we'll go with joy, to give the world the love that makes us one,
the love that makes us one.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 482, stanza 5*

The ELCIC's *Statement on Sacramental Practices* (1991) identifies the sacraments as "means of grace through which God's gracious, forgiving and nurturing love is freely given to God's people". They are "signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith" (*Sacramental Practices 2.5* after *Augsburg Confession*, Article XIII).

In this regard, we need to be reminded that when speaking of the sacraments, Lutherans have been loathe to localize the divine action in specific acts —such as pouring water or eating and drinking— but rather point to the significance of the entire external and visible action as instituted by Christ. Hence, the entire liturgical act serves this "awakening and strengthening of our faith" and by our proper participation in this act we, in effect, give further witness to the "signs and testimonies" of God's gracious will that are evident in the sacraments themselves.

Given this reality, worship becomes the environment or context wherein faith is both awakened and modeled. Here we practice the virtues of the Kingdom, primary among which is the call to live a life of Christian service. In effect, worship becomes to life what practicing our scales is to preparing for a piano recital. Worship becomes the primary training ground for the life of discipleship and servanthood within the world.

In my experience, Christians are quite adept at enumerating what we are doing with regard to fulfilling the important liturgical, educational and physical agendas of congregational ministry. However, we struggle, it seems, with identifying and claiming those ministries which are undertaken by Christian people and Christian communities in and through the world.

The focus of God's mission and saving action is *the world*. Our mission should be similarly focused. The brevity of the assisting minister's dismissal in the Holy Communion service is no accident. There are no subtle or drawn-out transitions. It comes quickly. "Go in peace. Serve the Lord!" "Go in peace. Remember the poor!" "Go in peace. Share the good news!" Almost abruptly, it seems, we are sent out the door, out into the world to take up God's mission. The liturgical celebration mirrors that movement as elements of bread and wine are gathered and taken to the sick or homebound members of the assembly. The peoples' work — the *leitourgia* — continues, albeit in a different setting.

It is helpful to remember that we whom God calls to be salt spend at least 95% of our time in solution; that is, in *the world*! We are called to be salt *in the world*. We are called to be light *in the world*! We are

called to live lives of blessing *in the world!* Jesus wasn't sent because God so loved *the church*, but rather because God so loved *the world!*

Christianity isn't an institution, but rather a movement whose missionary focus is always directed outward into the world. As such, the things that we do within our communities of faith bear significance only insofar as they serve and support that outward movement. We gather, only to go. We meet, only to be dispersed. We share the story only to better live the story. We receive Christ's body only so that we might become Christ's body.

This is our liturgy. This is our way.

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In 2002, the ELCIC's Program Committee for Worship invited a number of bishops, pastors and teachers to write a series of pastoral letters under the title "Reclaiming Our Birthright: Pastoral Letters on the Every-Sunday Celebration of Holy Communion."

Based on an Eastern Synod Lutheran essay by Bishop Michael Pryse and introduced by Bishop Raymond Schultz, the letters had a two-fold thrust: They were designed to assist pastors and congregational leaders in their reflection and teaching on the matter of every-Sunday Holy Communion and to help the people of God to faithfully and deliberately reclaim their baptismal birthright.

The essays are available on the ELCIC + Worship Matters page at Lift Up Your Hearts www.worship.ca.