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## APPROPRIATED SINCERITY Reading Prayers out of a Book

1 I've quoted *Peanuts* before. "Always be sincere," says Charlie Brown, the comics' endearing loser, "even if you have to fake it."

2 I thought of these words when I began to address this month's posting. Let me backtrack a bit.

3 In an early parish ministry pastorate, I attended a noontime meeting of my congregation's quilting group, a half dozen women who were not infrequently if uncharitably designated the *Bitch and Stitch* sisters. On this occasion I was asked to lead devotions, so naturally enough I turned to our just then recently published *Lutheran Book of Worship* and directed my sisters to its form for Responsive Prayer (Suffrages) – for more than 100 years a part of official, if often ignored, North American Lutheran piety, along with Matins (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer).

4 The word Suffrages is from Latin roots meaning to allow or permit or support, as in older translations of Jesus' words in Matthew 19:14: "Suffer the little children to come to me..." Hence in church use, Suffrages is a series of brief intercessory prayers – prayers for others. It is a prayer-form unique in the church's tradition in providing an opportunity for prayer alone – no preaching, no scripture reading, but simply Lord's Prayer, Creed, and Biblical verses, mostly from the Psalms, read responsively, and short, simple prayers, all keyed to specific hours of the day. Hence Suffrages may be used in the Morning, at Noon, in the Afternoon, at Evening, Before Daily Work, and even Before Travel.

5 It's enormously useful, in homes and in parishes, simply by its brevity and simplicity. The current version may be found on pages 328-331 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

6 I had the group turn to its pages in our worship book, and led its responses, with – I thought – sincere and deep personal piety. I was somewhat taken aback, as you might imagine, when one of the group attacked me verbally and publicly, then and there. "Pastor, that is simply vain repetition. How can you call that sincere devotion, when

we're simply reading words out of a book?"

7 I should acknowledge that my accuser in the quilters' group had only recently joined our parish, having been reared in a congregation with a history of limited appreciation, shall I say, of the wider catholic tradition that I embrace. She was reared to respond that way, that is: to be suspicious of anything "read out of a book." Hey, she's my sister in Christ. I have to love her, even when that's difficult. And she was currently a leader in my own parish.

8 Well. Are "prayers read out of a book" less sincere than a spontaneous outpouring of the heart? Isn't it better to pray out of your own heart, out of your own piety? Three responses:

9 First, as I have maintained in these postings for twenty years, there is a significant difference between private prayer and public prayer. In private prayer you are free to pour out your heart in whatever form comes to your lips or heart. The spontaneous prayers of a human heart will often be inelegant, awkward and even inarticulate, if you were to transcribe them. Scripture teaches us that God's Spirit covers for us, when the best we can do is sigh or groan.

10 But the Bible also reminds us that public prayer must be understandable. The best public prayer can even be eloquent. You should be able to add your personal endorsement – your "Amen!" – to any public prayer. *1 Corinthians 14:16*.

11 Erasmus of Rotterdam was supposed to have said something like this: "God is not much offended by bad grammar, but He takes no delight in it."

12 That's a reminder than any who presume to pray in public had better know how to construct an articulate sentence in their hearers' language. Or they are presuming too much. To lead public prayer is to willingly accept the burdens of speaking with grammatic accuracy and even eloquence. Hence for a leader of public prayer to read a prayer "from a book" is actually an act of public humility. You are acknowledging that this prayer, in this book, with this wording, is better than anything you can come up with "out of your own heart." Of course those who pray "from a book" must be willing to endorse the prayer they are reading, just as their hearers must.

13 It follows – this is second – that piety alone will not suffice if you presume to lead public worship. I've sung this song before in these postings. Competence is also necessary: taking the time to learn the craft of worship leadership. (Do they teach this competence any more in Seminaries?) I want my worship leader, my pastor, to be a competent mechanic, no less than my mechanic in the auto shop.

14 Piety alone is never sufficient for leading public prayer. We may certainly expect that piety come first. But competence is also necessary. And we gain competence by emulating and appropriating the gifts of others. "From a book," if necessary.

15 Let me suggest that there are two types of sincerity: spontaneous sincerity and

what I will call "appropriated" sincerity.

16 Spontaneous sincerity is the uncensored outpouring of a human heart. But that's often not enough in public prayer.

17 Not everyone is gifted with the ability to use language fluently or gracefully. It is to authors and poets that we must often turn, if only to find words to better express our own thoughts and feelings. By all means, if you have the eloquence, feel free spontaneously to invent your own prayers on the spot. But don't dismiss the humbler practice of appropriating anothers' experience as your own.

18 Which brings me to my third observation. Christian people have a responsibility to learn from their own past. Their Tradition. Over the years I tried to teach that Tradition to my critic in the quilter's group.

19 I would have little confidence in any worship leader who scorns the worship gifts of prior ages. It's simply part of Christian maturity: To try to learn to love what our forebears have loved. Even their piety. Even the language in which they expressed that piety. That means – Sorry! – reading "prayers from a book" at least until you've trained yourself to pray in public with a measure of our forbears' eloquence.

