

Author: Michael Pryse

Series: Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices

Series Editor: André Lavergne

Issue: Easter 6, 1992

Copyright: © 1992, 1998 Sub-Committee on Worship and the Arts, Parish Life Committee, Eastern Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit and mention of <http://www.worship.ca/> as the source.

The Rev. Michael Pryse is (1999) Bishop of the Eastern Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Unto All the World: Liturgy as Preparation for Service

A Story

William Bausch, in *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, offers the following:

Two brothers worked together on a family farm. One was unmarried and the other married with children. They shared what they grew equally as they always did, produce and profit. But one day the single brother said to himself, "You know, it's not right that we should share the produce equally, and the profit too. After all, I'm all alone, just by myself and my needs are simple. But there is my poor brother with a wife and all those children."

So in the middle of the night he took a sack of grain from his bin, crept over the field between their houses and dumped it into his brother's bin. Meanwhile, unknown to him, his brother had the same thought. He said to himself, "It is not right that we should share produce and profit equally. After all, I am married and I have my wife to look after me and my children for years to come. But my brother has no one, and no one to take care of his future."

So he too, in the middle of the night, took to taking a sack of grain from his bin and sneaking across the field to deposit it in his brother's. And both were puzzled for years as to why their supply did not dwindle. Well, one night it just so happened that they both set out for each other's house at the same time. In the dark they bumped into each other carrying their sacks. Each was startled, but then it slowly dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another. Suddenly the dark sky lit up and a voice from heaven spoke, "Here at last is the place where I will build my Temple. For where brothers meet in love, there my Presence shall dwell."

Liturgy and Service; Worship and Work

For many Lutherans, issues concerning the sacramental life have focused almost exclusively on questions relating to inner spirituality and personal piety. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's *Statement on Sacramental Practices* broadens this focus by accentuating the connection between liturgy and service, worship and work. The *Statement* reminds us of the ways in which the primary liturgical acts of the Christian community can become occasions for "brothers and sisters to meet in love;" occasions within which the "divine presence dwells," inspiring faith and equipping us for service.

The *Statement* introduction 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" (SP 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.

This reality affirms the truth that 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.

Given this assumption, worship becomes the environment or context wherein faith is both awakened and modelled. 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 your scales is to preparing for a piano recital. Worship becomes the primary training ground for the life of discipleship and servanthood.

The story is told of a man who had to wear a mask; a mask which made him look much nicer than he really was. He had to wear it for years. But when he finally took it off he found that his own face had grown to fit it and he was now truly beautiful. What had begun as a disguise had become a reality.

The same principle is at work in children's make-believe games and explains why those games are so important to their development. Children are always "pretending" to be grown-ups-playing house, playing store all the while hardening their muscles and sharpening their wits so that the "pretense" of being grown-up can become a reality.

The ritual life of the Christian community serves a similar function. And while there is a dishonest kind of pretending wherein we pretend to be something we have no intention of truly becoming, there is also a good kind of pretending wherein the pretense leads us to the real thing. It is within this latter category that much of what the typical Christian assembly does on a Sunday morning could properly be placed. Week after week a multitude of liturgical lessons is being repeated again and again lessons which aid us in "imitating" the one in whose name we gather.

Worship: Training for Discipleship

The liturgy begins, yet, already, many lessons have been taught between parking lot and the pew: Help Mrs. Smith carry the flowers in from the car. Hold the door as the three Jones kids dash, squealing, into the narthex. Several warm words of welcome, conversations. A quick glance at the watch and it's time to start.

Sins are confessed, then, together, we hear a word of forgiveness and grace that empowers us to loose and forgive others. In the power of that word we rise and lift our voices in words of praise that encourage us to live "lives of praise" in the coming week. Next, one of our peers, a lay person, leads in the bids of the Kyrie. She also prepares us to serve, reminding us that ministry is the business of the *whole* community and not some chore we pay a professional hireling to do on our behalf.

After a "collecting prayer" that focuses the community's concerns for the day, we move into a time of listening. Here, our identity is further defined as we share the words that have done the most to form us. The sermon clarifies this focus, arising out of the encounter between the Word and our lived experience. Here we are reminded most pointedly that what we do in our gatherings is intimately related to what we do when we pass through the door on our way home.

After another hymn, we lay both ourselves and our beliefs on the line, proclaiming together who God is and what God has done. "*Credo!*" "I believe!" These are stirring, courageous words in a world that seldom gets beyond "I suppose" or "perhaps". Proclaiming such powerful truths makes it that much more difficult for us to contradict what we have confessed by our actions in the coming week.

Next we offer up our prayers. Intercessions are offered to God for a multitude of persons and situations. But again, in lifting these concerns before God we must also take hold of them with our own hands. One of the fruits of prayer is right action. Change is effected within the one who prays.

In the Peace we are driven, once more, to make this same connection. As we bless one another, we are pushed to take the implications of our worship seriously and are forced to evaluate our level of preparedness to serve and bless one another.

Next, the gifts are presented: bread and wine and offerings. "We offer ourselves, our time and possessions, signs of your gracious love." In truth, we offer ourselves. The table is set; a special prayer is offered. And then, the very gifts that we have offered up to God in thanksgiving are returned to us, outwardly the same, but inwardly changed with the Presence of the Risen Lord!

Then we rise. We have to physically *get up* from our seats and go forward. Shoulders rub as together we are fed. Our gifts have become the bread of life, the cup of salvation. The miracle of the incarnation happens all over again as Christ enters our lives, giving us power and a new preparedness to serve.

Our time together is nearly finished. At this point, the liturgical tempo changes abruptly. A prayer is said, a brief hymn is sung, then a blessing and a dismissal. Blessing is not just for the church but for the *whole world!* Having been served by Christ and by one another, we are sent forth in blessing. The words come short and quick, quite literally pushing us through the door and into the world! The supper has ended. So also has our once per week lesson in discipleship.

"In the dark they bumped into each other carrying their sacks. Each was startled, but then it slowly dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another."

Worship: Putting on Christ

To use the terminology of scripture, what we have just participated in is a ritual process of "putting on Christ;" "Christ being formed in us;" "coming to have the mind of Christ." In matters of faith, none of us is self-made; none of us comes to faith *on our own* and none of us can sustain faith *on our own*. Whatever faith any of us possesses has been bestowed upon us by God through a community, through the Loises, Eunices, Pauls, Martins, Moms and Dads, Sunday School teachers, friends and pastors who, in all times, together comprise the church.

As the primary and chief act of that community, the liturgy helps us to become "imitators" of Christ in spite of our unbelief and in spite of our weaknesses. An act of pretense? Perhaps. But if so, it is an act of *faithful* pretense, a properly-motivated play-acting that Christ honors and turns into a reality.

+ + +