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Liturgy as Formation for the Practice of Peace

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First, thank you to the board members of Theology and Peace for the invitation to speak with you about the intersection of Christian liturgy and Mimetic Theory today. To be in the company of Jay Phelan and Vern Neufeld Redekop is a true honor. And to be in the company of old friends and new friends is a delight.

Allow me to locate myself for you: I come to this work as both a parish pastor and a historian of Christian liturgy. As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ I have served on the pastoral staff of the First Congregational Church in Wilmette, Illinois for the past 14 years and as senior pastor for 5 ½ of those years. As a scholar, I am completing a PhD in Liturgical Studies at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. This coming fall, I will be teaching in the area of Christian worship at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

Before we proceed I want to delve a little deeper into where we are all located, liturgically speaking. What I mean is, to have a conversation about Christian liturgy among such a group may be tricky in and of itself. We do not all come from the same tradition or denomination. We do not all use the word *liturgy* to describe what we do in corporate worship. So I want to take time, just going around the room, to share how we each worship in this moment.

[At this point, the group answered:]

- Do you go to weekly or regular worship—in any role?
- In what "liturgical tradition" is your assembly: meaning both denomination and worship style.
- In one sentence, can you state why you go to worship?

[Almost all of the participants attend worship regularly either as clergy or as members of a congregation. The participants were split about evenly between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The Protestants ran the spectrum from evangelical/free church, to Mennonite, to mainline denominations such as United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Episcopal Church USA.]

As for why we attend worship, participants had a variety of answers such as:
"In gratitude"
"To say thank you"
"It is part of my baptismal calling"
"Because I can't live without it"

The most common answers were *"for the sense of community, to be part of the Body of Christ"* and *"to participate in/receive the sacrament of Eucharist/Holy Communion."*

To talk about Christian liturgy in such a diverse group is a challenge, but it is not unlike the challenge that any of us has as a lay person, or a pastor, preacher, or presider, or as a professor. What we have in common here may be our interest in Mimetic Theory, not necessarily our denominational backgrounds or worship patterns. However, we do have one thing in common: the fact that we participate regularly in public, corporate Christian worship is not the cultural norm. Already, our habits of life place us in the minority, and they are profoundly counter-cultural.

To move forward in this conversation about Christian liturgy and Mimetic Theory, I want to pick up on two thoughts from Jay Phelan's talk on the Book of Revelation yesterday:

- The New Testament writers engage in genre bending, in irony and parody.
- "The church exists to insist on the troubling story of the cross."

During our question and answer time yesterday Dr. Phelan suggested two things:

- that we understand the story of the cross in its full breadth: Incarnation-Crucifixion-Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost.
- that we not evacuate the language of the cross, or sacrifice, or the difficult parts of the story, if I heard him correctly.

During this talk, I am going to refer to the "parable of the cross," but please hear that phrase as encompassing all of the mystery of salvation.

So as we talk about Christian liturgy and Mimetic theory, we first have to address the term *"liturgy."* Liturgy is a borrowed word. It comes from Greek. *Laios*/*Lewos* means people, but not just any people. It is a public assembly of people: soliders, subjects, non-clerical people. It is plural and it is public. *Urgos*

means power, energy or work. So *laiturgia* means the power, or work, of the assembled people.

Now, this word has roots in Greco-Roman sacrifice. The *laios* assembled to do their work. And what was their work? To be led by priests or priestesses—(appointed by heredity or inheritance) in rites of sacrifice—thought to assuage the anger of the gods, win the favor of the gods, to transfer guilt onto the victim, to keep the balance of the universe and the peace of the community. The *laios urgos*, the liturgy, the people's work.

When Christians pick up this word, we pick it up as a parable. It is genre bending. It is ironic, this phrase "Christian liturgy." I want to suggest to you that it was self-consciously ironic in the ears of the early Christians. (For those who are interested, I traced this early Christian history in my paper at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion Conference in 2007, which can be accessed on the COVR website).

Today I want to focus on our current predicament. We might like to dispense with that phrase, "Christian liturgy", let alone our historic practice, because that phrase and practice has baggage, sacrificial baggage, trailing along.

Among the items in the bag are other borrowed words:

- *Thusia* sacrifice
- *Prosphora* offering
- *Thuma victim ("hostia"* in Latin)
- *Bemos* altar

Sacrifice, offering, victim, altar. Wouldn't it be better to do without this word *liturgy* and its accompanying baggage? In this day and time, are we capable of hearing this language for the parable it is?

I want to suggest that we not dispense with the word liturgy too quickly. Let's try to hear it as the parable, as the irony and critique that it is when it is used by early Christians, for this may have implications for our work.

We owe the fact that we can hear and recognize the phrase "Christian liturgy" as a parable to an interpretive tool that we call Mimetic Theory. In this time together, let's explore how Mimetic Theory helps us see and reclaim the parabolic nature of Christian liturgy.

Remember that parable is also a borrowed word: *balleiv,* from Greek "to throw" or "to cast" and *para* "around" or "beside." A parable casts one meaning along side another, juxtaposes one story with another. In order to remember how parables function I always turn to John Dominic Crossan's book The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story. Crossan describes the experience of reading a Gospel parable. Parables cannot exist without a myth to critique, to explore, to break open:

> "Parable shows us the seams and edges of myth…Parables are fictions, not myths; they are meant to change, not reassure us. Parable is always a somewhat unnerving experience. You can usually recognize a parable because your immediate reaction will be self-contradictory: 'I don't know what you mean by that story but I'm certain I don't like it.'"[1]

Those of us who hear the language of sacrifice in the Christian Liturgical assembly may have much the same experience as Crossan describes: we don't know what it means, but we're sure we don't like it. Yet those of us familiar with Mimetic Theory know that the gospel exposes myths of sacrificial violence. So let's let the parable of Christian liturgy work on the myth of sacrificial violence a little longer.

Crossan reminds us not to dispense with parable, lest we allow the parables of Jesus (and by extension, the parables of the liturgy) to slide back too easily toward myth and allegory:

> "Parables give God room. The parables of Jesus are not historical allegories telling us how God acts with mankind, neither are they moral example-stories telling us how to act before God and towards one another. They are stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of the story itself. They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God. It is only in such experiences that God can touch us, and only in such moments does the kingdom of God arrive."[2]

Let's propose that as we participate in Christian liturgy we are invited to be that new humanity that is safely, and boldly, at play in the kingdom of God which is as the gospel says, dawning among us already (Luke 18: 20).

And let's suppose that we participate in Christian liturgy for the very reason Crossan names: so God can touch us. This involves, as he suggests, becoming

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[1] John Dominic Crossan, The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988) 38-39.
[2] Crossan, 99-100.

vulnerable to God, hearing stories that shatter the structure of our accepted world. We want Christian liturgy to reassure us, and it can, in ways that are not our own. But often, we are tempted to diminish the parabolic nature of Christian liturgy and resort to the mythical, because parable invites change, dislocation, vulnerability. In Christian liturgy, we place the structure of our accepted world (including the words and baggage of sacrificial violence) next to our founding narrative, which is not a myth, but the parable of the cross.

The crisis in Christian liturgy is that we are often tempted to confuse the parable of the cross in two ways. Either we read and proclaim it allegorically, as myth—which is the temptation of the narrative of sacrificial violence. Christian liturgy slides easily from the parabolic to the mythological if we are not careful with it. The other temptation with the parable of the cross is to evacuate it, to ignore it, because preaching, proclaiming and centering our praise around it seems so fraught with complication. There is so much pain in the world—why draw attention to the pain of the cross? Are we engaged in a glorification of suffering? But Christian liturgy slides easily from the parabolic to the insipid if we are not careful with it.

As an antidote to these temptations, let's remember that liturgy is a ritual of imitation. We are imitative creatures, and if we don't engage in Christian worship we will engage in some other worship. So we ask, what is it we are imitating in our songs and silence, at the font and at the table, in our prayers and proclamation in Christian liturgy?

Ritual imitation is the reenacting of a community's founding narrative, repeated religiously to bring about peace and ward off chaos. As Mimetic Theory shows, when a community is engaged in a pattern of imitating its founding on the myth of sacred violence, the peace is bought with a price, the price of unanimity minus one, the price of scape-goating the victim.[3] The gospel, and Christian liturgy by extension, critiques the myth of sacred violence both textually and ritually.

Christian liturgy is a ritual imitation of a founding narrative that as was suggested yesterday, needs to be insisted upon. That founding narrative is parabolic at its core. It is a narrative of a loving, benevolent grace-filled God, grieved by human violence, who takes flesh and dwells among us full of grace

[3] It is assumed that the participants at the Theology and Peace Conference are familiar with the Mimetic Theory of René Girard. For an overview, see Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). It is one of his later books, but perhaps more accessible to students of theology. See also Chris Fleming, René Girard: Violence and Mimesis (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004).

and truth, who takes the form of a servant and empties himself (kenosis), who bids us peace, leaves us with a holy meal and a charge to go and baptize, and "proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God has come near, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, receive without payment, give without payment." (Matthew 10: 5-8). This God gives us the Spirit as comfort and advocate in the work of the gospel, which is why we are here. And this God, as John Hill suggested yesterday, is not like other gods!

So it is hard to tell this story. It is hard to invite people to gather in worship of this God around an altar which has no victim and a meal which is no sacrifice and stories which insist on self-emptying. It is not an easy, because parables only work if we know the myth the parable wants to critique. In order for the parable to make sense, you have to know the myth of sacred violence. In order for Christian worship to transform, you have to know that you know the myth—a realization that dawns only through confession and conversion.

The work of conversion in Christian liturgy is to be converted away from the myth of sacred violence and toward the gospel. To know that we know the myth of sacred violence, and admit that it is a myth we are prone to rely on, is a life-long process. The work of Christian liturgy is to get us to confess that the myth we've organized our lives around its foolishness.

Because this is hard, it is easier to proclaim that the parable of cross is foolishness. Paul knows that the parable of the cross scandalizes us:

> "The message about the cross is foolishness…Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (I Corinthians 1: 18a, 20b-26, NRSV)

Perhaps foolishly, Christian liturgy uses the patterns, gestures and actions of public worship to critique all other forms of worship and to give witness to the God who is not like other gods, who is like no god at all, who empties himself and takes the form of a servant (Philippians 2: 7).

In Christian worship, which is a ritual of imitation, how do we imitate this God who is no god at all? How do we praise this God, who does not need our sacrifices or our violence?

The possibility of our ritual imitation of this benevolent God is possible because we are created in the image of God and called to be imitators of Christ. (Genesis 1:27, Ephesians 5: 1). What we are asked to do is join the imitative praise of the angels who sing "Holy!", whom Isaiah glimpses and John sees eyes wide open in his mystical vision (Isaiah 6: 3, Revelation 5: 13-14).

The angels are imitating the eternal praise of non-rivalrous, mutual love among the persons of the Trinity that the Cappadocian Fathers called *perichoresis*.

What a joyful and peaceful thing, the invitation to imitate the praise of the angels! We think that to join in the imitation, it would be easier if we dispensed with the baggage of "liturgy" and its accompanying traveling companions. Wouldn't it be easier if we dispensed with the parable of the cross?

Revelation reminds us that when our eye and our praise is not on the Lamb, we may worship the beast instead (Revelation 13: 15) and what is the beast if not the myth of sacred violence? Or, we may be tempted to worship even the angel of God instead of the Lamb (19:10). Yet the angel says "Worship God!"

The praise of the angels which we are called to imitate takes place in the city with no temple, no sacrifice (Revelation 21: 22) before the Throne and the Lamb. And there is no way to tell this story, or participate in the worship this story invites, without the parable of the cross and the liturgy it gave birth to—a liturgy that was self-consciously critical of the "worship of Babylon" in the eyes of the early church.

If we evacuate the parable and the language of the cross, and the ancient patterns of Christian liturgy, we evacuate the critique of the myth. What we seek to do in Christian worship is to heighten the contrast between the parable and the myth, not diminish it.

In our Gathering Rites on Sunday morning, one of the first things we can do, in following the deep wisdom of Christian liturgical tradition, is enter into a time of confession. The time of confession invites us to identify the myth of sacred violence and our participation in it. We have an aversion to this. A brief "Century Marks" commentary in an October 2008 issue of The Christian Century

noted that Michael Jenkins, then dean of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminar,y said that a pastor told him that he had "decided to do away with a corporate confession in worship services. 'It's too much of a downer', the pastor explained." Jinkins replied by saying "Isn't it more of a downer for people to leave worship without confessing their sins and hearing the assurance of God's pardon?"[4]

Indeed, corporate confession is a moment to admit our complicity in scape-goating, in going along with the crowd, in doing the very things we hate. It is a moment to admit that we participate in the myth, and to hear God's pardon and assurance.

As we enter the liturgy of the word we hear in the scriptures, the preaching, and the storytelling that there is an alternative to the myth of sacred violence called the gospel. People need to hear this story, and our job as preachers is to name the difficult ways the gospel story challenges our assumptions and our lives. When we are preaching, we can resort to the ancient category of mystagogy to reveal the parabolic nature of the gospel and the liturgy.

Following the liturgy of the word, our prayers of intercession turn us outward as the confession before the scripture readings turned us inward. Then we stress that the offering or collection is about offering ourselves to something other than consumerism or collecting more toys and stuff. And then we come to the celebration of the Eucharist, whether it is weekly or monthly in our congregations, we come not to the sacrifice of violence but to the sacrifice of praise, to the eternal feast. This is where all are invited. This is where there is enough. This is where there is a priest but no victim, a procession and offering that is not a triumph, a sacrifice that is one of praise, an offering that is not to God but for us; food, drink, the medicine of immortality, for us and for all.

As we engage in planning and leading Christian worship, Mimetic theory can help us evaluate and avoid three temptations. The first temptation is our idea that worship needs to be relevant, and that to make it relevant, we shape it after forms of gathering that we borrow from popular culture. Indeed, worship is always inculturated, and in order to critique its culture, worship must make use of its culture. But Mimetic Theory rightly cautions us to evaluate what we imitate. And Christian history reminds us that not all elements of culture—

[4] *Century Marks*, The Christian Century October 21, 2008, 8.

including the culture of sacred violence—bear imitating. Rather, they bear critiquing.

The second temptation is our fear that worship is boring, and so we seek to make it exciting. It is our friend James Alison who has best assuaged this fear in his "Worship in a Violent World."[5] Alison characterizes the "Nuremberg" style of worship as that which builds us up to a pitch, as pageantry and rally that is mean to "take us outside of ourselves" with the "un-Nuremberg" style of Christian worship which is meant as "the detox of our Nuremberg-ed imagination."[6] As Alison says:

> "When people tell me that they find Mass boring, I want to say to them: it's supposed to be boring, or at least seriously underwhelming. It's a long term education in becoming un-excited, since only that will enable us to dwell in a quiet bliss which doesn't abstract from our present or our surroundings or our neighbour, but which increases our attention, our presence and our appreciation for what is around us. The build up to a sacrifice is exciting, the dwelling in gratitude that the sacrifice has already happened, and that we've been forgiven for and through it is, in terms of excitement, a long drawn-out let-down."[7]

So we have our challenge cut out for us: we have to invite people to come to worship, week after week, to participate in something that seems boring, that is slowly deconstructing them and takes time. But consider the alternative: Mimetic Theory cautions us that when we become interested in stirring up crowds and creating a frenzy, we are about to resort to the myth of sacred violence, either in text or in act.

The final temptation is that worship is repetitive and so we seek to make it more varied. But worship is repetitive, because this is how ritual works. It organizes our repetition and imitation around praise of our self-sacrificial God rather than sacrificial violence. We have to understand that the language of liturgy is more like poetry than prose, it is the song of the angels, and to work, it needs repetition. In the wise words of the late Tom Talley:

> "Those of us who were deeply involved in historical, theological and pastoral consideration of the liturgy are, by this very fact, virtually incapable of leaving it alone. Loving it, we fondle it until it is misshapen. Certain that with a bit more planning it can be somehow 'better' next Sunday than last, we deny the assembly the one thing that it desperately needs: immersion in a ritual pattern whose

[5] A talk he has given numerous times, included as chapter two in his Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in (New York: Continuum, 2006) 33-49.
[6] Alison, Undergoing God, 38.
[7] Alison, Undergoing God, 45-46.

> authority, dimly understood but powerfully experienced, transcends our own ingenuity, erudition and energy."[8]

Here Talley is not far from Girard's notion of external mediation, articulated in his exploration of the novel. As contrasted with internal mediation, in which the desires of the subject and the model overlap and thereby come into rivalry, with external mediation:

> "the model or mediator is removed from the individual (whether historically, ontologically, or however) and so there is no competition for an object of desire."[9]

The external mediation of Christian liturgy depends on symbols and rites that are not mythical but ancient, so historically removed that they do not become obstacles or rivals for us. The presider is less likely to become a model-obstacle in the liturgy if he/she is willing to consent to pray following the ancient patterns of the church. This is not to say that there is one pristine pattern of prayer, but that there is wisdom in relaxing into a historically grounded pattern which is practiced week-by-week.[10] It is important to distinguish the external mediation of the parable of Christian liturgy from the rites of the scape-goating mechanism which culminate in ritual sacrifice. For Christians, the external mediation of liturgy must be dependable but not fascinating: liturgy is not aimed at centering attention on ourselves or on the scapegoat, but on God (the innocent victim). Christian worship is not intended to fascinate us, to thrill us, to stir up emotions of solidarity around a scapegoat, or to take us outside ourselves so that our complicity in the suffering of the victim is concealed. Christian worship is meant to calm us, relax us, take us deeper inside ourselves so that our complicity in the suffering of the victim is revealed, and so that we can confess our complicity and understand ourselves as forgiven, that we might be free to praise God and act on behalf of victims.

Post-Script:

The question and answer period that followed generated some helpful discussion about the relation of liturgy and ethics. In my spoken remarks I referred to the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet. Here I will summarize my and expand my response:

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[8] Thomas J. Talley, Worship: Reforming Tradition (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1990) as quoted in Gabe Huck, ed., Liturgy: A Sourcebook (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994) 82.

[9] See The Girard Reader, 39, 291.

[10] Paul F. Bradshaw, The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy, Second Edition (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2002). Bradshaw argues for an original diversity of early worship practices, an important caution against idolizing any particular liturgy. Yet within this diversity he is able to trace certain patterns.

It is Louis-Marie Chauvet who cautions us that we cannot skip from the story of the cross found in scripture immediately to the acting out of mercy and compassion compelled by scripture (the acts which make up our ethics) without the mediation of sacrament, which is the site in which the Word enters our flesh and transforms it, so that we can share it. Often, because of the phrase "Christian liturgy" and its accompanying baggage, we are tempted to evacuate the category, and the practice of liturgy in Christian life. Often, because we have lost sight of the parabolic nature of Christian liturgy, and don't trust the prayers to point it out or ourselves to proclaim it, we are tempted to try to pass from the scriptural to the ethical directly. But Chauvet points out that scripture, sacrament (liturgy) and ethics are a sort of tri-pod that must stay in balance in the Christian life, and the sacramental is the passage between the scriptural and the ethical:

> "…the good health of faith depends precisely on this discomfort. This is to say that the tension is not to be abolished but managed. Its proper management requires, as we have seen, a twofold rereading: a liturgical rereading of ethics, which shows that the life of faith and love is a 'spiritual offering,' and an ethical rereading of the liturgy, because the grace received in the sacraments is given as a task to accomplish, as one prayer after communion expresses: 'Make us become what we have celebrated and received.' Without the liturgy, ethics can be most generous but is in danger of losing its Christian identity of response to the prior commitment of God. Without ethics, sacramental practice is bound to become ossified and verge on magic. It is the sacrament that gives ethics the power to become a 'spiritual sacrifice'; it is ethics that gives the sacrament the means of 'veri-fying' its fruitfulness.[11]

[11] Louis-Marie Chauvet, The Sacraments: the Word of God at the Mercy of the Body (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001) 65.