

## Liturgy and Social Justice

Barbara K. Lundblad

As a prelude to this vast subject, I would like to read a passage which is becoming part of my contemporary canon, a scene from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. She describes a worship service--though it is indeed quite different from most of our liturgies! This service is led by a holy woman named Baby Suggs. She is an elderly black woman, born into slavery and later bought into freedom by her son. Now, she lives in her own home on her own piece of ground near a little town in Ohio. Every Saturday, when warm weather came, Baby Suggs would gather the people--all of them former slaves--in the Clearing (with a capital C) . . . "In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the Clearing while the people waited among the trees."

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her.

"Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

"Let your wives and your children see you dance," she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart . . . .

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty. Love your hands: Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. YOU got to love it, YOU! . . . This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you . . . ."

Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.

"This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved."<sup>1</sup>

To even begin to think about liturgy and social justice is to believe that in our liturgy, we enflesh the very heart of what we believe. And in our liturgy we somehow bring together two words which we Lutherans have a very hard time saying in the same sentence: justification and justice. Larry Rasmussen, Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, is a Lutheran who has been wrestling with these two words. In an article written for *Christianity and Crisis*, he talks about the new voices in theology, voices being raised primarily

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1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 87-88.

in developing countries. He summarizes what he has heard in these words:

If the preoccupation of the early Christian centuries was to give creedal expression to the Christian faith in a way that would make intellectual and metaphysical sense to the Greek world; and if the preoccupation of the Reformation was the status of the guilty sinner before God; then the attention in our time has turned to the moral and ethical decisions of making history.

It is hardly a surprise that we ask about moral content as a measure of any God-talk today. We test the potency of faith claims by the difference they made for human well-being and the well-being of the wider creation.<sup>2</sup>

With Baby Suggs and Larry Rasmussen as a back drop, I turn now to focus on two aspects of this overwhelming topic, "Liturgy and Social Justice." These two rather broad areas are: 1) The Global Context of Worship and 2) Right Relation: Justification and Justice in the Same Sanctuary.

*Worship: Local Setting, Global Context*

I know you've already heard at least one presentation which lifted up the global context of worship, but I am assuming Mark Bangert and I have slightly different things to say--particularly since I have never been to Africa! But, I am also convinced that we need to be reminded over and over again, whenever we worship, that liturgy must grow from this perspective: worship takes place in a local setting within a global context.

When we plan for worship--whether musicians, pastors, lay leaders, or artists, we ask this question: "How will the global community be present here today?" Perhaps one

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2. Larry Rasmussen, "New Voices in Theology," *Christianity and Crisis* (May 16, 1988): 180, 181.

of the things preachers should do is to preach a series of sermons on the Kyrie, so that people would really hear what we sing each Sunday:

For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord.

Even as we pray for "this holy house and all who offer here their worship and praise," we also pray for the whole global church. How will this wider community be present with us?

As a case study, I lift up our experience in worship this past Sunday at Our Saviour's Atonement Church in New York City. It may be a bit "abnormal" as an example because we marked that Sunday as the end of Central America Week. But that in itself is a reminder to those of us who plan worship--a reminder that it's important to keep the Church calendar and the yearly "secular" calendar side by side. This doesn't mean that the yearly calendar takes over, but there *are* days important to the life of the community and to the contemporary Church which are not marked by the church commemoration in our Lutheran worship resources: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, for example, or the remembrance that this year, Good Friday coincided with the death of Oscar Romero on March 24th. Many parishes plan liturgies for peace marking the anniversaries of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August. This is simply to say that we need to pay attention to what's going on in the life of the world as well as the seasons of the Church year.

Back to last Sunday! Every year, the Interreligious Task Force on Central America makes available a packet of resources for Central American Week. We began with those resources and asked: how can we create a worship setting in which people will be aware of Central American sisters and brothers the minute they walk into the sanctuary? Nicaraguan paintings, an altar cloth and stole from Guatemala, the bulletin cover--all are ways of helping us *see* the global community as we worship in New York City. There are many hymns, both English and Spanish, which make use of Latino music. Indeed, there are collections of hymns which enable English speakers to sing in Spanish

without great difficulty. We need to acknowledge that we are citizens of a nation which is becoming increasingly bilingual. (It's not quite the same as past immigrant groups. There are people in our congregation who protest: "We don't ever sing in German!"--though sometimes, we do! Yet, the situation is different in terms of the Spanish language. We live in a hemisphere in which Spanish is surely more prevalent than English. We can at least tune our ears to the sounds of our neighbors, and try to sing with them as best we can!) The Augsburg hymn collection edited by John Ylvisaker contains several songs in Spanish such as "Alabare!"--a very singable song which picks up the words from the hymn of praise in the communion liturgy.

On most Sundays of the Church year, the Second Lesson is from one of the New Testament epistles. Usually, we read straight through an epistle week by week. Epistles are--as their name suggests--letters. It seems appropriate to hear not only letters written in the early Church communities, but also letters written by Christian communities in our own day. Last Sunday, our epistle was a letter written by Bishop Medardo Gomez of El Salvador to the Lutheran churches of North America. It was a letter written after the 1987 bombing of his church. (As many of you know, that same church was bombed once again this past December.) Though Bishop Gomez' letter is not part of the official canon of Scripture, it is surely a powerful witness of faith from one part of the global Christian community to another. We have also received several letters from the leaders of the church in Namibia. Last Sunday marked what should have been the beginning of the peace process in Namibia, but was marred by warfare. It would have been most appropriate to read one of the letters from Bishop Kleopus Dumeni as a concrete reminder of our connections with sisters and brothers in that land. These "younger" churches often bear witness to a vitality of faith which has been lost by our congregations in the United States. Thus, their letters are not only connections with parts of the global community but a source of empowerment and revival for our sagging spirits.

Now, I'm skipping over the sermon, not because we didn't have one, but because that would be another whole presentation and will have to wait for another day. I'll

move on to the Prayers. Most of us are quite accustomed to lifting up concerns of the global Church in the prayers of the people. Last Sunday, one of our staff members wrote the prayers for that day. (She had grown up in Central America and her parents now live in Managua, so it was possible to pray in a very specific way for individual people.) She typed out the prayers and gave them to people in the congregation. These people read the prayers in the service and also took them home with them to continue praying during the week. Others were invited to name names of people they knew or had read about. There is something very powerful about hearing the names of real people (even those we don't know). It is the same kind of difference we sense in praying "for all who are sick" and actually lifting up the names of John, Mary, Gladys. Our prayers take on flesh when we say names aloud.

The communion liturgy draws us into the global community without any extra planning: "Gather the hopes and dreams of all/Unite them with the prayers we offer." But there are also some ways to be more intentional about the vision of the global community gathered at Christ's table. In the preface, it is possible to add words such as ". . . now with your church in North and South, singing in Spanish and English and in every tongue, we join their unending hymn . . ." Your own poetic imagination can change the words in the book: in one word you can make explicit the implied connection with God's family in every place. The same is true of the eucharistic prayer. We can remember, along with Peter and Mary Magdalene, other witnesses to the resurrection power such as Oscar Romero. Our invitation to the table might make use of the welcome from the Nicaraguan church which talks about coming to the "corn patch of the Lord." (That could be especially meaningful in areas of our country where there are more corn patches than there are in my neighborhood!) At the end of worship, we proclaim, "Go in peace. Serve the Lord!" Immediately after our worship last Sunday, we invited those who could to stay and write letters on behalf of Central American people. This became another kind of offering (even though we Lutherans are not accustomed to taking a "second offering" on Sunday!) We had sample letters prepared to get people started; letters were written to congressional representatives urging them

to support a new bill on behalf of refugees threatened with deportation.

We need to find ways to take worship with us into our daily lives. And this global understanding should extend into other areas of the congregation's life: the Sunday School could surely write letters to children in the Salvadoran church; an adult series on refugees could be planned as follow-up to worship. All of these programs grow out of the fundamental conviction that local worship is never isolated from the whole Church on earth. In order to hear and see that, we need to be more intentional and specific, rather than talking only about "the world."

And this is very important to congregations which are *not* in communities which are ethnically diverse. The congregation I serve in New York is primarily an Anglo congregation. But all of us need to keep before us a picture of the church which is far more diverse than we are! It is very important for white congregations to celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., and if the congregation doesn't understand why this is so, it's even more important! We need to keep remembering his birth until there is a sense in which his witness is heard as a witness to *all* of us, not just African-Americans.

When we plan worship each Sunday, we need to ask: "How will the global community be present here today?" It cannot be only on "Central American Sunday"--that's like having Youth Sunday or Women's Sunday, then forgetting about youth and women the rest of the year! All our worship happens in some local setting, but it is always in a global context far bigger than the boundaries of our sanctuaries.

*Right Relation:  
Justification and Justice in the Same Sanctuary*

This section is far too broad; I'll probably make grievous errors and jump over things far too quickly, but here we go.

The term "right relation" is perhaps best known in the writings of theologian Carter Heyward of Episcopal Divinity School. She tries to help us see that when we talk

about right relations with God, we are also, of necessity, talking about right relations with other people and the whole of creation. We Lutherans are more accustomed to thinking about "justification" as right relation/reconciliation with God. At times, our talk can become very individualistic and seem disconnected completely from right relations with other people, the arena sometimes called "justice."

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is at the center of Lutheran worship. This sacrament enacts our theological conviction that God's grace comes to us as a gift. We are justified by grace, not works of the law. I would like to focus on Baptism in this section because it is so central to our Lutheran view of justification. (And it seems that Holy Communion, by its very name, moves us toward community in ways Baptism does not.)

I often wish that our baptismal liturgy would incorporate the text which the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document lifts up: Ezekiel 47. I won't read the whole passage, but it's a wonderful description of the Church. If you remember the passage, Ezekiel is brought to the threshold of the temple. Water is flowing out from under the door. Deeper and deeper it flows, until it is a river you must swim in. I pick up the text at that point:

Then, he led me back along the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the stagnant waters of the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. (Ezekiel 47:6b-9)

A powerful image of Baptism! Water flowing down over the sides of the font, not worrying whether we spill it on the hymnal or the acolyte or the carpet! Flowing down the aisle and under the doors of the church out into the streets! Our Baptism draws us into mission; it is a

sacrament which has implications for *doing* as well as *being*, for justice as well as justification. Now this is a massive topic! I want to focus particularly on our baptismal liturgy as related to racism and sexism.

Several years ago, there was a story in *The Lutheran* magazine which described a certain Baptism. At the beginning of the liturgy, the baby was dressed completely in black. At some point, there was a struggle (not over the baby, but some kind of struggle between good and evil). Suddenly, the black garment was thrown off by the parents and the baby was dressed completely in white, a sign that now the baby was reborn as a child of God.

Friends of mine who are black wept when they read that story. What it said to them was quite clear; to be dressed in black (to be black) is to be associated with evil (to be evil); to be dressed in white (to be white) is not only to be good, but to be God's child. We need to look carefully at the things we say and at our symbolic actions. Now, I'm not recommending that we change the color of the Good Friday paraments or the colors of Easter. But if black is only and always evil in our singing and our speaking, in our symbols and our art work, it gives a powerful message over time.

What then can we do with a tradition filled with images of darkness and light? British hymnwriter Brian Wren invites us "to bring many names." (I don't know if you are familiar with his work, but if you go home with nothing else from this conference, take with you the title of his recent book *What Language Shall I Borrow?*) His book has a subtitle, "God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology." The book focuses on sexism in our worship language, but he also invites us to explore new possibilities for darkness and light.

We should be singing this hymn together, but I'll read and you can imagine the music:

Bring many names, beautiful and good;  
celebrate, in parable and story,  
holiness in glory,  
living, loving God.

Hail and Hosanna,  
bring many names.

Strong mother God, working night and day,  
planning all the wonders of creation,  
    setting each equation,  
    genius at play:  
Hail and Hosanna,  
strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,  
feeling all the strains of human living,  
    caring and forgiving  
    till we're reconciled:  
Hail and Hosanna,  
warm father God!

Old, aching god, grey with endless care,  
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,  
    glad of good surprises,  
    wiser than despair:  
Hail and Hosanna,  
old, aching God.

Young, growing god, eager still to know,  
willing to be changed by what you've started,  
    quick to be delighted,  
    singing as you go:  
Hail and Hosanna,  
young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,  
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,  
    closer yet than breathing,  
    everlasting home:  
Hail and Hosanna,  
great, living God!<sup>3</sup>

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3. Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 137-138.

"Joyful darkness far beyond our seeing." The poet invites us to sing a *positive* image of darkness. The same is true of Marty Haugen's setting *Vespers '87*. Vespers, so steeped in images of light breaking into darkness, cannot be easily changed. Yet, Haugen's Hymn to Light at the beginning of the service includes this line, "God of daybreak, God of shadows/Come and light our hearts anew." Thus, God is not only associated with light, but also embraces the shadows. Brian Wren does not tell us to do away with all images of darkness, but encourages us to "bring many names" so that black/darkness can also be seen within the love of God. I would also add a note to preachers: we must never equate blackness with evil. We have much more freedom with language and images in our sermon-writing than is true with words printed on the worship book page. We have no excuse for perpetuating an image which debases people of color. All of us can find hymns (and often they will be new) which speak of darkness in joyful, mysterious, revelatory ways. Such imagery should find its way also into our baptismal liturgies: God knowing us in the darkness of the womb; God's new life *not* defined by color, but by inclusive embrace.

Is the baptismal liturgy sexist? This, too, is a huge topic far beyond the scope of this presentation. However, let me say one thing very clearly: there cannot be in our liturgies, our teaching, our singing, our prayers anything which hints that Baptism is a cleansing of woman as woman and mother, or any sense in which Baptism washes away the "dirt" of childbirth, or sexuality. Most of us would probably argue that our baptismal liturgy doesn't do such things, and we have moved away from that kind of language (and away from commemorating the purification of Mary after childbirth). Yet, it is unfortunate that there is nothing in our liturgy which celebrates the wondrous miracle of birth. In the salvation history prayer in which so many images of water are lifted up from creation to the Red Sea to Jesus' baptism at the River Jordan, there is still no room for the waters of birth. It may be that this prayer is not the place for such affirmation. But could we not find room to give thanks for birth itself: "In the waters of birth, this child came forth from the womb . . . ." Are we so centered on the Second Article that we have no room for creation? All we say is "We are born children of a fallen humanity"--yes, I know that!

But do we not also believe that creation and birth remain gifts of God? If I were a woman who had given birth to a child, if I were a father who had been present for the delivery, I would be glad for a word which gives thanks for the wonder of birth itself. For the acknowledgment of the gifts of human life and sexuality, for the mystery of the womb. Will justification be destroyed if we dare to give thanks for God's grace in creation?

John Ylvisaker's hymn "I Was There" helps us move in this new direction. This hymn, which many of you probably know, sees Baptism as a promise for the whole of life. It sings, "I was there to hear your borning cry, I'll be there when you are old . . . ." It doesn't begin by saying we are only fallen, only evil. God was there at "our borning cry." As Lutherans, we do need to work on creation theology. There is little in the Confessions (creation wasn't a contentious issue), but now, in these times, when water itself is in danger and all of creation so threatened, we seem to have no way of speaking about creation. How can we begin to sing and speak about the wonder of birth? the value of women? the naming of the womb?" Again, Brian Wren helps our imagination:

God of many names  
gathered into One;  
in your glory come and meet us,  
Moving, endlessly Becoming.  
God of Hovering Wings,  
Womb and Birth of time,  
joyfully we sing your praises,  
Breath of life in every people.<sup>4</sup>

"God of Hovering Wings/Womb and Birth of time." He picks up scriptural images which have been forgotten and puts them on our lips. And our vision begins to change; we see what we had missed before.

Embracing the concerns of racism and sexism, but moving a bit beyond these two issues, is our failure to see that

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4. Wren 146.

Baptism has anything to do with our "doing." With our attention focused on justification by grace through faith, can we also acknowledge that Baptism anoints us for mission? In addition to Ezekiel, I wish we would sometimes read portions of Luke 4 or Acts 2 at Baptism so that we would hear more often the connection between Baptism's anointing and the anointing of the Spirit. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' Baptism occurs in chapter 3: "You are my beloved Son," says the voice from heaven. Soon after Baptism, Jesus comes to Nazareth, his home town. In chapter 4, Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19). You are my beloved child; you are anointed to preach good news to the poor. Jesus understood his ministry in light of this commission.

Last summer, I spoke on the topic of Baptism to the Lutherans Concerned gathering in Toronto, Canada. This was a gathering of over a hundred Lutherans who feel that their Baptism has been nullified by the church because they are gay men and lesbian women. Can we not begin by saying together, "We have been baptized." But continue by affirming, "We have been anointed for a particular mission in the world." Then, together, gay and straight Lutherans within the family of God can begin to speak about ethics --without endangering justification by grace. We must do that: we cannot tell gay and lesbian people to stay *out* of the Church while the Church talks about sexual ethics. We need to tie these things together somehow as Lutherans--justice and justification in the same sanctuary. You are my beloved child. You are anointed for mission. You are marked by the sign of the cross. We can and must talk about both being and doing. Then, the baptismal waters will flow out under the doors of the church to bear God's word of grace into the world.

A closing comment. I'll call it "Bringing Silence into Speech." Once again, I turn to Brian Wren who helps us see how serious the issue of language is for our worship. How we speak is tied to how we act; we must pay attention

to speaking so we may become more just in the ways we  
worship. This poem is the starting-point for Wren's book:

If  
every naming of God  
is a borrowing from human experience,  
And if  
language slants and angles  
our thinking and behavior,  
And if  
our society  
makes qualities labeled "feminine"  
inferior to qualities labeled "masculine,"  
forming women and men  
with identities steeped in those labelings,  
in structures where men are still dominant  
though shaken  
and women still subordinate  
though seeking emancipation . . .

Then it follows that  
using only male language  
("he," "king," "father")  
to name and praise God  
powerfully affects our encounter with God  
and our thinking and behavior;

So that we must then ask  
whether male dominance and female subordination  
and seeing God only in male terms  
are God's intention  
or human distortion and sin;

For if  
these things are indeed  
a deep distortion and sin,  
So that  
women and men are called to repent together  
from domination and subordination,

Then how  
can we name and praise God  
in ways less idolatrous,  
more freeing,  
and more true

to the Triune God  
and the direction of love  
in the Anointed One, Jesus?<sup>5</sup>

We need to be serious about language. It still makes too many of us laugh. We think of it as a side issue; even many committed to justice beg to be excused because they need to attend to more important matters. But language shapes the way we see everything. In our worship, we must do what Brian Wren invites us to do: "bring many names." Names about darkness, about women, about men, about aging, and young people--and surely, names about God. "Strong mother God . . . Warm father God." We need, for example, a third "Hymn of Praise" in our communion liturgy. The two that we have contain only male language for God; and the victorious, almost military language of at least one of them makes it impossible to simply change from pronouns to nouns! We need an alternative akin to Marty Haugen's setting of The Magnificat in the vesper service. Here is a hymn which sings the justice language of the lowly being lifted up, of the hungry being filled. But Haugen also sets the text in second person so that we sing, "You have cast the mighty down . . . You have filled the hungry with good things . . ." Once again, the lesson is *not* to erase all masculine imagery from our speaking and our singing, but to begin more and more to bring many names so that each person will hear her or his own story.

This also means lifting up in specific ways those who have been silenced. In our liturgies, our preaching, and our prayers, we need to be conscious of those whose voices are never heard: battered women, victims of incest, people living with AIDS and those who care for them, people of every race, the poor, gay men and lesbian women. Two years ago I was asked to write an article about evangelism for a church publication. I wrote, "Look around your congregation and ask yourself, 'Who's not here? are there women and men? elderly people and children? single and divorced people? youth who come alone? gay men and lesbian women?'" When the article was printed "gay men

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5. Wren 1.

and lesbian women" was deleted; all others were included --and "married" was added! The ministry of naming is a justice ministry; if people never hear their names they will not feel part of the body of Christ.

This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass . . . YOU got to love it. YOU.<sup>6</sup>

It is a way to help us see that we are the *body* of Christ, justified by the free gift of God's grace, called forth to bear God's word of justice in the world. "This is flesh I'm talking about here." So be it!

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6. Morrison 88.