

## Let the Servant Church Arise: Waters for the Thirsty, Supper for the Hungry

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### The Servant Church

The title of this address provides some clues about the perspective I bring to the question of the church's mission in the world. Use of the term "servant church"—borrowed directly from the hymn "The Church of Christ in Every Age"<sup>1</sup>—reveals my bias for language of servanthood to describe that mission. Such language has governed my own identity as a deaconess for nearly three decades. Aidan Kavanaugh argues that the ascetic, who is dedicated to "the art of maintaining a life of 'right worship,'" serves as the exemplar for the baptized, pointing them toward the Christian's ultimate end: that is, to see and to know "God face to face."<sup>2</sup> In a similar fashion, I wish to argue here that the deaconess or diaconal minister is, to paraphrase Kavanaugh, "simply a stunningly normal person who stands in constant witness to the normality of Christian [*diakonia*] in [the] world."<sup>3</sup> This life of service—once again I paraphrase Kavanaugh—"is a life all the baptized share, a life within which the professed [*diakonos*] is nothing more or less than a virtuoso who serves the whole community as an exemplar of its own life." I speak to you as a deaconess, as one of those "stunningly normal persons," whose life of service is nothing more and nothing less than the life of all the baptized, the servant church.

If the life of the baptized is one lived in service to the world, such a view of the church in mission could go in many directions: Some might see as a prime focus protecting the lives of the unborn; for others, it's welcoming the outcasts of our age, gays and lesbians, into the life of the church; perhaps the latest in "sexy" social concerns is care of creation

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<sup>1</sup>Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia, PA: Board of Publications, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), #433, stanza 3.

<sup>2</sup>Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 160–161.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 161.

after centuries of exploitation by humanity. But I remain haunted by the images and stories that inundated us at the end of August 2005 after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, when we were confronted with the cries of the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable among us, begging for the most basic needs to survive. I remain haunted by the callous and clueless comments of Barbara Bush on September 5, made in an interview with American Public Media's Marketplace after touring the Astrodome filled with evacuees. I quote her words as transcribed in one news source: "And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this—this (she chuckles slightly) is working very well for them."<sup>4</sup> And so to exorcize these demons that haunt me, I propose to speak about our baptismal calling in the world in terms of the church's response to poverty.

### **Waters for the Thirsty, Supper for the Hungry**

Much has been written on the sacramental symbols and their universal meaning.<sup>5</sup> Those universal symbols can become even more powerful for us when they are associated with the particular. Liturgists assert that the waters of baptism evoke images of life and of death. The flooding in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina seared into our memory this paradox. We heard of many trapped in their attics by the destructive, death-dealing power of the flood waters; we saw images of the more fortunate ones, who hacked their way onto their rooftops and hoped for rescue before they would succumb to death from dehydration in the oppressive August heat. And when deliverance from rooftops was delayed, supplies of life-giving bottled water sustained families surrounded by the death-dealing flood until they could be evacuated.

The bread of the Eucharist also carries this paradoxical meaning, as Gordon Lathrop reminds us:

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<sup>4</sup>Editor & Publisher, September 5, 2005, [http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1001054719](http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001054719) (accessed 22 March 2006).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 91–97; Phillippe Rouillard, "From Human Meal to Christian Eucharist," in *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, ed. R. Kevin Seasoltz (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 126–137; and Leonel L. Mitchell, *The Meaning of Ritual* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1977), 28–33.

We eat to live. In this truth, death is suggested: without eating we would die, and even now our life is sustained by the death of the plants, and if we consume meat with our bread, of the animals around us. In eating we are at the edge, the limit, of our possibilities ... At the loaf we may know ourselves to be contingent beings, dependent on that which is outside us.<sup>6</sup>

Few, if any of us gathered here, have ever experienced the sense of contingency and limits related to food and its lack thereof as did those who resorted to robbery and looting in New Orleans in the wake of botched relief efforts. Confronted with that reality, I pondered what I would have done had I been in that situation. In the shadow of those who cried for bread I became conscious of my own limits and existence as a contingent being. I suspect many of us here today experienced in a heightened way the power of the symbol of bread shared as we sat down to daily meals and gathered around the Lord's table for the Eucharist in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina.

Finally, the symbol of wine: I think of Acts 2, where the disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, are mistaken for those filled with "new wine." I think of wedding toasts and festive meals of all sorts made complete by the presence of the fruit of the vine. And I think of New Orleans at Mardi Gras, of parades and drinking and outrageous behavior that expresses the human desire to escape the mundane, the desire for an experience of transcendence.<sup>7</sup> The ancient sacramental symbols are filled with extraordinary, fresh power by the events of last August in New Orleans. The question that remains is this: how can we harness the power of these sacramental symbols to effect change in the world?

### **Justice and Justification**

For answers, I now turn to my favorite dead German theologian, Martin Luther, for insights into the relationship between faith and life, between liturgy and justice. It is with some fear and trembling that I propose to use what we commonly call Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, but which I, following the terminology of William Lazareth, will call "God's twofold rule of humanity."<sup>8</sup> I chose to avoid the common

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<sup>6</sup>Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 91.

<sup>7</sup>Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 92.

<sup>8</sup>William H. Lazareth, "Introduction," in *The Left Hand of God: Essays on Discipleship and Patriotism*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), xvi.

terminology for two reasons. First, certain scholars of Luther have convinced me that it's a stretch to call Luther's writings on the two kingdoms a "doctrine."<sup>9</sup> Second, many have linked this so-called "doctrine" with the rise of Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup> My use of a different term is one way of distancing my use of Luther from those misinterpretations of Luther during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that made a false separation between the temporal and spiritual and cut off any critique of temporal institutions by the church.

That Luther's proposal steers a middle course between the separatist, sectarian, dualistic approach of the Anabaptist tradition and the theocratic tendencies of the Calvinist tradition is precisely the value of God's twofold rule of humanity for those of us concerned about the role of Christianity in the public square. The latter position, theocracy, is, in my opinion the greater danger today; it is the goal of American Evangelicalism, whose influence has been on the rise for the last quarter of a century.<sup>11</sup> Those advocating this view of a "Christian America" seem unaware that a theocracy was tried in Geneva and the New England colonies with—at best—mixed results, not to mention the fact that it violates the first amendment of the Constitution. The former position, the Anabaptist separation from an evil world, has had its grand experiments in this country, and one can certainly detect strands of that position in the immigrant Lutheran communities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Luther's writings on God's twofold rule of humanity, however, point us toward a middle way between these two extremes, a middle position that avoids imposing Christian values on an increasingly pluralistic culture and at the same time exhorts the church and the individual Christian to be engaged fully in creating a just society.

Luther's most explicit writing on God's twofold rule of humanity is titled *On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, written in 1523. He begins by asserting the divine origin of civil law and temporal

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<sup>9</sup>See Ulrich Duchrow, "Introduction," in *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror of Society?*, ed. Ulrich Duchrow (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 3–9; Per Frostin, *Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Critical Study* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994), 1–2.

<sup>10</sup>Oliver K. Olson, "The Revolution and the Reformation," in *The Left Hand of God*, 5; Frostin, *Luther's Two Kingdom Doctrine*, 2–10; Duchrow, "Introduction," in *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror of Society?*, 9–17.

<sup>11</sup>See Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), 99–262.

authority. God is at work through civil law and government to restrain the wicked, to establish justice, and to preserve peace.<sup>12</sup> Yet, he continues, there is an apparent contradiction within scripture, namely, those passages that support the divine origin of secular authority against those passages that exhort Christians to “turn the other cheek” (Matt 5:38-41), not to defend themselves (Rom 12:19), not to return evil for evil (1 Peter 3:9), and thus seem to imply that “the temporal sword,” to use Luther’s term, has no place among Christians.<sup>13</sup> To this seeming contradiction, Luther offers his distinction between God’s twofold rule of humanity:

Here we must divide ... all [hu]mankind into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world....

All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law. There are few true believers, and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil....

For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that ... they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace.<sup>14</sup>

Although the Christian has no need of the law and governing authorities for his or her own sake, yet, says Luther, the Christian is called to obey the secular authorities for the sake of one’s neighbor.<sup>15</sup>

Even more, he encourages the Christian, if qualified for a civil service job, to “offer your services and seek the position ... [for] in such a case you would be entering entirely into the service and work of others, which would be of advantage neither to yourself nor your property or honor, but only to your neighbor and to others.”<sup>16</sup> He sums up the distinction for the Christian:

In this way the two propositions are brought into harmony with one another: at one and the same time you satisfy God’s kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly.... In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the

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<sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, in *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 45:85–93.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 88, 90, 91.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 95–96.

person or property of others, *you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor*. The gospel does not forbid this; in fact, in other places it actually commands it.<sup>17</sup>

As I interpret Luther from the perspective of twenty-first-century, American participatory democracy, these words apply to more than the paid civil servants; as a citizen and as a Christian it is everyone's calling to "govern one's self according to love and tolerate no injustice toward one's neighbor."

Although I take issue with him on some of his core assertions, I think Richard John Neuhaus offers some good insights on the Christian's responsibilities in public life. In his book *The Naked Public Square*, he begins the chapter titled "The Morality of Compromise" by stating, "In a democracy some issues are best fudged, some questions cannot be pursued relentlessly to their logical end, except at the price of imperiling public discourse. Restraint and compromise are not dirty words."<sup>18</sup> The middle course described by Luther, living under the twofold rule of God, requires Christians to engage, as Neuhaus says, with "a compromised political order. In the absence of the best, they pursue the better."<sup>19</sup>

The work of God through government and society is not as clear and plain as God's work in the spiritual realm; the work of God in the secular realm is fraught with ambiguity, both because it is carried out by sinful humans, and because the work itself, especially the curbing of evil, can seem opposed to God's very nature.<sup>20</sup> Luther reminds us that while we are called to "tolerate no injustice toward our neighbor," our striving against injustice can only be partially successful in this life. Sin still reigns in the world, but the church is called to negotiate within the world and, as Neuhaus says, "pursue the better" to alleviate suffering and eradicate injustice.

For the Christian, the liturgy plays a key role in negotiating life under this twofold rule of God. The liturgy is both *where* we cross the "boundary" from one kingdom to the other and back, and also *how* we come to know God through the revelation of Jesus Christ, knowledge that forever alters our understanding of the secular world under God's rule. In

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 96, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 114.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>20</sup>David J. Lose, "The Ambidextrous God: Luther on Faith and Politics," *Word & World* 19/3 (1999):264–265.

other words, using the metaphors of geography and identity and the language of epistemology—how we come to know—I will attempt to sketch the relationship between the liturgy and the twofold rule of God.

### Geography and Identity

I am a Minnesotan. With those words I've linked geography and identity. I could speak of other aspects of my identity—my marital status, my work, my family of origin—but I wouldn't get far on any of these topics without also speaking of place, of geography. And so it is with one of the two major metaphors for baptism from scripture. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night with his questions and is told, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:6). Through baptism we cross the boundary into the kingdom of God; with this new birth by water and Spirit we are called, as Jesus was at his baptism, sons and daughters of God. In baptism we have entered into a new place and are given a new identity, a new status. Listen to these images of geography and identity scattered throughout our baptismal liturgies. From the rite of baptism in *Lutheran Book of Worship*:

We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn *children of God*.<sup>21</sup>

In the waters of the Jordan your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit. . . . He made water a *sign of the kingdom* ...<sup>22</sup>

we give you thanks for freeing *your sons and daughters* from the power of sin ...<sup>23</sup>

... *child of God*, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit ...<sup>24</sup>

We welcome you *into the Lord's family* ... workers with us *in the kingdom of God*.<sup>25</sup>

And from the rite of baptism in *Lutheran Worship*:

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<sup>21</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 121.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 125.

Hear how our Lord Jesus Christ has opened *the kingdom of God* to little children.<sup>26</sup>

Live always by the light of Christ, ... and *enter* with him to the marriage feast of the Lamb *in his kingdom*.<sup>27</sup>

In baptism our new identity as children of God places us within the boundaries of the kingdom of God. Our worship spaces with fonts at the entrance are designed to reflect the change in identity and boundary crossing that takes place in baptism. Our eucharistic liturgies, which often beginning with an order of confession and forgiveness, draw us again and again across that boundary into the kingdom of God's grace, forgiveness, and new life. But our baptism both calls us into the kingdom of God and sends us out into the kingdom of the world for a life of service to that world. Our eucharistic assemblies reflect this profound insight through the work of the assisting minister, ideally a lay person.<sup>28</sup> To the assisting minister is given the responsibility of leading the intercessions, in which the needs of the church *and the world* are offered to God. While the benediction, the blessing of God given to all who belong to the kingdom, is pronounced by the ordained presider of the community, the one who sends the baptized back into the world with the words "Go in peace. Serve the Lord" is the assisting minister, one of the baptized who serves the Lord in the world every day.

We Lutherans have struggled to pass on the richness of Luther's baptismal theology, a theology that reversed the status quo of sixteenth-century society, moving the baptized from the bottom of the social scale to the top and elevating their daily work to vocation from God. In his *Commentary on Psalm 117* Luther wrote: "But to make of [monks] an estate superior to the ordinary class of Christians, that is all wrong; it denies and curses Christ. ... The estate of the Christian should hover above all things like heaven above earth, for it is the status of Christ Himself and God's own work."<sup>29</sup> For Luther, living in the grace of one's

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<sup>26</sup>Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 199.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 203

<sup>28</sup>See Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *A Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 10–11; *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on The Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 14, 46; Fred L. Precht, ed., *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 224, 235–236.

<sup>29</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), in *LW* 14:22.



baptism in daily life made one's work more pleasing to God than the prayers and Psalms of a monastic community.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the best attempt by Lutherans to hand on this empowering insight into baptism is the rite of Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized in the World in the Welcome to Christ series. In the opening address, it connects baptism with "those who are endeavoring to carry out their vocations as Christians in the *world*."<sup>31</sup> Throughout the brief rite, the theme of the baptized *serving* in the *world* recurs: "Will you endeavor to pattern your life on the Lord Jesus Christ, in gratitude to God and in *service* to one another?" It speaks of the baptized and their "commitment to *serve* in Christ's name," and closes with a blessing that echoes the language of Luther's *On Secular Authority*, exhorting all to "go out into the world in peace; ... return no one evil for evil; ... support the weak; help the suffering; honor all people."<sup>32</sup>

How does this language of our liturgy work out in concrete situations? In preparation for this address, I spoke with two of my colleagues on the advisory council of the Institute of Liturgical Studies, John Morris and Jim Honig, who both pastor congregations in well-to-do suburban areas, places which, in my opinion, present difficult challenges for service among the poor. I asked about their congregations' work in the area of social justice, seeking concrete examples for the ways in which the laity live out their baptismal vocation in the world. Both enumerated various ways their congregations were at work to address specific needs and patterns of injustice. For example, both congregations partner with other areas churches to support a food pantry in their communities, supplying not only food and financial support but also volunteers to staff it. Both work with local agencies that connect the congregation with concrete needs of specific families. At Faith Lutheran Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, the congregation sponsors families in transition from homelessness to a stable living situation; Faith Lutheran pays the rent and utilities for up to two years on an apartment, while the head of the household gets job training and is able to become self-sufficient. Prince of Peace in Dublin, Ohio, partners with two other congregations and Habitat for Humanity. In five years, the three parishes have built twelve homes for low-income families

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<sup>30</sup>Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1542–44), in *LW* 6:346–349.

<sup>31</sup>*Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 59.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

in Columbus. No doubt each person here could tell of similar work in his or her congregation.

Both pastors also spoke of their goals for their respective congregations. Prince of Peace currently gives 20% of its 1.4 million dollar budget to outside ministries; John would like to see that reach 50%. That kind of financial commitment is an indication of the congregation's sense of mission on behalf of the world and is invaluable to the myriad of non-profit organizations that are the recipients of this generosity. At the same time, John noted it is easier for people to give money than time, and still more difficult for members to form meaningful relationship with people being served. Jim's long-term goal at Faith Lutheran Church is to build a relational culture, one that begins among the members and then extends beyond to their community.

It is precisely this relational aspect of the church's mission to address injustice in our society that I see as our greatest challenge. It's especially difficult in settings like Faith and Prince of Peace, both located, to use the language of John Morris, in "the cocoon of the suburbs." He describes the problem in the starkest of terms, calling some activities inadequate "yuppie sensitivity training." The well-to-suburbanites go to serve food in a soup kitchen so they can return to their million-dollar homes and feel good about themselves, especially less guilty about their own wealth. To my mind, he describes all the Barbara Bushes of our congregations, for whom a quick tour of the Astrodome is inadequate to transform the way they see the world.

For all the good done by Christians on behalf of the poor, the weakness or flaw is exposed at the level of relationships formed—or more accurately, not formed—between those desiring to serve and those who suffer the injustice. It is at this point that language of two worlds, of two kingdoms, of boundaries and identity inherent in Luther's twofold rule of God and in our liturgies fails us. It's too easy for the spiritual and temporal realms to be misconstrued as the twofold rule of God for us and them; we, who have been blessed by God, are called to help those from whom God has deigned to withhold God's blessings. The boundary between the kingdom of God experienced in the liturgy and the kingdom of the world in daily life becomes the boundary between my suburban cocoon and that awful world where wickedness and injustice abound and where I would not dare drive my new Lexus. I am willing to send some excess cash to alleviate some suffering, but don't challenge me with statistics about decades of white flight to the suburbs that eroded the urban tax base, about housing practices that segregate people by income bracket, about

power structures that maintain a status quo of haves and have nots. In this misconstrued twofold rule of God, my identity as a child of God, as God's beloved, becomes an identity based on race, class, and income that separates me from "the other."

The solution is not to chuck all this biblical and liturgical language and to consign Luther's writings on the twofold rule of God to the dustbin of history. Vitor Westhelle, relying on the earlier work of Ulrich Duchrow, offers an alternative: "[The] failure in the interpretations of Luther's thought on justification and justice ... was not to recognize that when and where the two meet we are in an eschatological dimension."<sup>33</sup>

### Epistemology and Eschatology

Along with the recovery of the eschatological nature of the sacraments, indeed, of the liturgy itself, comes a new epistemology, a different way of knowing. If the baptismal language from John 3 and Jesus' baptism speaks of boundaries and identity, Romans 6 gives us the eschatological view of baptism, of an event in the past with future implications that changes us now, in the present. Paul writes, "For if we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ... The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:5, 10-11). According to Luther, our struggle against sin continues throughout life, but in baptism, knowing the final outcome will be union with Christ in a resurrection like his, we "walk in newness of life" now.

The eschatological dimension is inescapable in our eucharistic liturgy. We implore God through song to "give us a foretaste of the feast to come" in the meal we are about to share.<sup>34</sup> That feast alluded to in the LBW offertory canticle is described in Isaiah 25:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,  
a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow,  
of well-aged wines strained clear.  
And God will destroy on this mountain

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<sup>33</sup>Vitor Westhelle, "The Word and the Mask: Revisiting the Two-Kingdoms Doctrine," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 176.

<sup>34</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship*, offertory canticle, 86.

the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
God will swallow up death forever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.  
It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.  
For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

The feast will be for *all people*; God will destroy the shroud covering *all nations*; God will wipe away the tears from *all faces*. With that foretaste, that glimpse of a world restored to wholeness, we are given a new way of looking at the world now. We can be confident of God's all-embracing love for the world. We can be sure of God's desire for justice and reconciliation.

The Eucharist connects us first of all to Jesus' final meal with his disciples, a meal to which Jesus gives a clear eschatological meaning with these words, "Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). But our eucharistic celebrations also recall all of the shared meals of Jesus recorded in the Gospels,<sup>35</sup> meals at which the outsider and outcast are welcomed, meals at which the established social order is challenged and through which the kingdom of God, when God's justice will be established, breaks into the present order and shows people what God desires for the world. The Eucharist, seen anew through the lens of Jesus' open table fellowship, reorients us to see the outsider and outcast as the beloved of God.

Our eucharistic celebrations recall the feeding of the multitude, the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. In the Gospel of John the feeding of the five thousand takes place on a mountain, like the vision of the prophet Isaiah. The five barley loaves, the bread of the poor, are transformed into an abundance of food so that all "were satisfied," all received "as much as they wanted" (John 6:11, 12). In the presence of Jesus, the Bread of Life, the eschatological hope is realized; the kingdom of God is not a future event but a present reality. So for us, the Eucharist is a moment when the Bread of Life is present for us, when we are given

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<sup>35</sup>John Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 23–26.

the foretaste of the feast of rich food and well-aged wines in a piece of bread and a sip of wine. The presence of the crucified and risen Christ in this meal has the power to change the way we see the world. Because through the liturgy we *know* of God's desire for all to share in the feast, we can actually *see* the multitude and their needs in the world. And we no longer have to respond like Philip and Andrew when faced with the overwhelming needs of the poor: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," said Philip. Andrew responded, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people" (John 6:7, 9)?

The language of sight as a new way of knowing is captured beautifully in the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The crucified and risen Christ meets them and instructs them on the road, but it is only during the meal, in the sharing of bread with them, as the text says, that "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Luke 24:13–31). In the same way, the Eucharist today has the power to open our eyes, so that we can recognize the crucified and risen Christ present in our meal together, and as Gordon Lathrop reminds us, to see Jesus Christ as he really is:

...we wait for God who is away, who is here only in a hidden way. Jesus Christ, whose presence is the center of our meeting, is the one always identified with those who are "outside," is the one whose cross is the only place he has to lay his head.<sup>36</sup>

And so, Lathrop continues, "The juxtaposition of the central things in our meetings opens us toward God and toward suffering in the world."<sup>37</sup> That image of being open toward God and toward the suffering of the world is not that of Janus, facing different directions at once. The eucharistic assembly opens us to see God and the suffering as one. When we are drawn into relationship with "the other," with the outcast, we are drawn deeper into relationship with God, for in "the other" and the outcast we encounter Jesus. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, commenting on the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31–46, says that the Christian's action of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned is more than "an expression of the 'social dimension' of faith.... such action has an element of contemplation, of encounter with God, at the very heart of the work of love."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 108.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>38</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 104.

## Liturgy, Formation, and Service

But the move from encountering Christ in liturgy to encountering him through social action is not a guarantee; it is not a given. Highlighting the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist through careful choices of liturgical texts and preaching alone will not accomplish the task. As Christian Scharen argues, a congregation's work in the public square results from more than their participation in the liturgy. His book, *Public Worship and Public Work*, critiques what he calls "a 'linear model' of relating worship and ethics," in which "participation in public worship forms one as a Christian, who then lives this out in public works of justice and mercy."<sup>39</sup> Scharen presents a more complicated, interactive model in which the communal identity of a parish and its pastoral leadership play key roles in the development of its "sense of public" and how it acts according to this sensibility.<sup>40</sup>

His conclusions are based on extended case studies of three urban congregations located in downtown Atlanta. According to Scharen, it is the communal identity of each congregation, not its worship life, that draws people to join, as he puts it, "because they feel a fit between their vision of church and the vision embodied in the congregation's communal identity." The liturgy then deepens the commitment already held by people, in part because the worship services "lift up and ritually embody the common ideals constituting each community as church."<sup>41</sup> In the two suburban congregations I "sampled," the pastors are deeply involved in shaping the communal identity and "sense of public"—to use Scharen's language. Both congregations have a rich variety of ways in which members can serve the poor in the world. Both pastors have visions of what they would like their congregations to become. Both also recognize the limitations of the service opportunities within their congregations, namely, their inability to foster deep, meaningful relationships between congregational members and the poor who are being served through their ministries.

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<sup>39</sup>Christian Scharen, *Public Worship and Public Work: Character and Commitment in Local Congregational Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 15–17, 42–48. Scharen does not discuss extensively the role of pastoral leadership in the theoretical chapters of the book, but the importance of pastoral leadership comes through clearly in the individual case study of each congregation.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

Christian Scharen's in-depth case study of the three Atlanta congregations reveals the same weakness, even for congregations located in a low-income, urban setting. Much good is accomplished on behalf of those in need, but there are few opportunities for the upper- and middle-class memberships of the congregations to come to know the poor who live in the community surrounding the churches. This was true even for the African-American congregation, whose members are also middle class and drive into the city from the suburbs.<sup>42</sup> You may be asking yourself, Would forming meaningful relationships really make a difference? Aren't the needs of the poor being met by the church already, and isn't that the real point of it all?

Perhaps. But we could all name someone we know or know of, who has become completely committed to a cause because she or he has had a personal experience that made this cause a passion for the person. There is the cancer survivor who devotes time and energy to raise money for the American Cancer Society, the once-abused woman who now works for the local women's shelter, the parents whose child has a learning disability and who become passionate advocates for education funding and reform. I believe our congregations need such passionate advocates for the poor, advocates who may not have experienced poverty firsthand themselves, but for whom the poor have become more than statistics. Such people could make a difference not only in the world but could also serve as leaven for the whole church, could be those exemplars of servanthood for the life of all the baptized.

Yet forming meaningful relationships between middle- and upper-class Christians and the poor hidden in our midst is a formidable challenge for the church. To quote John Morris again, it's easier for members to give money than time, and the first step toward forming meaningful relationships requires a commitment of that most precious commodity, time. Forming relationships is also very difficult because American society is structured in such a way that there are few, if any, naturally occurring means to mix with people of other classes and races. In a sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. just days before he died, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We must face the sad fact that at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 143–145. This section is the description of Big Bethel's Christmas Concert and meal to be shared with the homeless; the concert program was so long, the homeless people were excused and served dinner while the majority of the church members stayed in the sanctuary for the remainder of the program.

is no East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America."<sup>43</sup> Sadly, little has changed in that regard in the last forty years. Forming meaningful relationships with persons from another race or class will only happen through deliberate, careful, and dedicated action. The task of facilitating the formation of such relationships falls to those gathered here, to you, who are church leaders, both professional and lay. What I'm advocating here is a unified congregational approach: a deliberate, intentional attempt on the part of church leadership to link the liturgy and the eschatological hope imbedded in it with the weekly and seasonal rhythms and programs of parish life.

Allow me to offer some concrete ways in which your congregation might become better informed on the problems of poverty in the United States, might begin to break down the barriers of race and class, and might open up opportunities to form more genuine relationships with "the other." Some of you will be planning for fall programs in the coming weeks and months. Studying the issues of poverty and racism would be an initial step. Keep in mind that August and September will be the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina; the disaster will be highlighted in the news media, providing a perfect opportunity for congregations through Bible studies and discussion groups to take a close and critical look the problem of poverty in our country. In light of such study, your congregation might assess its current service in the public square. As part of that assessment, consider the following: 1) Does the congregation address the issue of poverty on local, national, and global levels? 2) How might the congregation enhance its volunteer opportunities beyond inadequate "yuppie sensitivity training" toward more meaningful interactions between parishioners and those served? 3) With whom might your congregation form partnerships that would provide venues for cultural exchanges between middle-class members and the poor? 4) Is the congregation involved in programs that challenge an economic system tolerating widespread poverty in the richest nation on earth?

Next, I would encourage all of you to seek out contacts with organizations serving the poor or with congregations located in low-income neighborhoods and to invite some experts to speak to your congregation about the issues facing the poor. And by experts, I don't mean the middle-class people who are probably running the organization or serving as the

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<sup>43</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," *The Sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Stanford University, [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/popular\\_requests/voice\\_of\\_king.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/popular_requests/voice_of_king.htm) (accessed 9 April 2006).



pastor. I mean the poor themselves; there are no better experts from whom we in the middle-class can learn. The head of the agency or the pastor of the urban congregation would most likely be the one to help organize the event, to identify the right experts who can speak articulately about their personal lives to a group of well-dressed strangers, and, perhaps, to moderate the conversation between the experts and learners. In a carefully planned forum, the experts on poverty could be encouraged to find their voices and be provided a welcoming environment in which they can speak candidly of their daily efforts to provide food, clothing, shelter, and health care for their families.<sup>44</sup> To plan a successful event at which the poor can voice their day-to-day concerns and trials will require acknowledgment of the expertise of the speakers. Just as we recognize the expertise of the guest preacher or the liturgical art consultant or the organ builder by paying them, so should the sponsoring church by compensating the speakers for their time and expertise on the topic of poverty. This suggested activity is not the perfect solution to the bifurcated society in which we live, but it would be a step forward from the trip to the soup kitchen that alleviates middle-class guilt and only intensifies our sense of the poor as so profoundly different from us that we cannot begin to glimpse the face of Christ in the other present there.

If the fall calendar would be devoted to study of the complex issues contributing to poverty in our society, the Epiphany Season lends itself to preaching and action. When I was executive director of a non-profit organization serving the poor, I loved speaking at local congregations during Epiphany, when the Gospel pericopes recount the ministry of Jesus among the disenfranchised and the psalms echo the cries of the poor and God's promise of deliverance. It's a wonderful season to highlight the eschatological hope in the readings and liturgy and to pair those liturgical experiences with service in the world in such a way that the baptized might see the face of Christ in their poor neighbor and catch a glimpse of God's reign of justice in the world today.

I have argued that for the baptized to live out their calling as envisioned by Luther, that is, to "tolerate no injustice toward [their] neighbor," our church leaders need to integrate more fully our liturgical witness to God's coming reign of justice with the baptized's witness in the world. As we all saw following Hurricane Katrina, the poor among us had

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<sup>44</sup>An alternative to this proposal would be a book discussion of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001).

been successfully hidden from our eyes; for the baptized to “tolerate no injustice toward their neighbor,” they must first come to know and understand the injustice inherent in our society. We have an opportunity to make progress toward that goal of understanding with the coming anniversary of Katrina. I encourage congregational leaders gathered here to be intentional as you plan parish education and formation programs. Use this coming year as a time to deepen people’s understanding of the issues related to poverty, and work actively to seek out or develop opportunities that might foster meaningful relationships across the socio-economic divide of our society. We need a committed few within our congregations with a passion for fighting injustice who can stand as exemplars for the all the baptized.

During the decade I directed an organization committed to confronting the problems of poverty and racism, I was also an active member of the small, African-American congregation in the low-income community where the organization provided its services, Kinloch, Missouri. While a significant percentage of the congregational membership was middle-class, all of those middle-class, professional members lived or had family ties in the community of Kinloch, where the overwhelming poverty was inescapable. One Sunday we introduced a new eucharistic liturgy with an innovative opening dialogue. Here’s one section from that dialogue:

Leader: Brothers and sisters in Christ: Prepare to eat the victory feast with one another.

People: As we come from crowded streets, past vacant lots, from full and empty tables, we wait to share the piece of bread and sip of wine that binds us close to you and all your people in this place and everywhere.<sup>45</sup>

After the service two members made a point of speaking to me about the new liturgy—a significant percentage, since the average Sunday attendance hovered around twenty-five! Both made reference to that particular section of the dialogue, commenting on its appropriateness for our congregation, who literally came past crowded streets and vacant lots to get to church, and whose members included those who came from full and empty tables to worship together. It was easy for Clara and Dorothea to make the connection between the eucharistic liturgy and the hungry because the poor and the hungry were their midst. The task before us is

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<sup>45</sup>“Community Liturgy 3: Easter Focus,” in *Urban Hymnal Supplement* (Milwaukee: Privately published by Cross Lutheran Church, 1980), 23.

to break down the walls that separate us by race and class in our society,  
so that the baptized can see clearly the connection between the  
eschatological feast we share on Sundays and their call to service in world.