

Worship and the Ministry of Reconciliation: Turning Walls into Tables*

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Thank you for the invitation to be with you. One regret I have had, not the only one, is that I have never attended the Institute of Liturgical Studies. Each spring my colleague, William Beckstrand, the cantor at University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis, would begin to invite and encourage me to join him for his annual journey to the institute at Valparaiso University. As I worked with Bill I began to realize that this event was like a pool of refreshing water that beckoned him through the often taxing days of Lent, Holy Week, and Triduum—"I know I can do this.... I know I can do this because soon I will be at Valpo ..."

This morning I want to express particular words of gratitude, but in so doing I hope you hear my appreciation for each of you. The particular words of thanks are for Bill Beckstrand and for Michael Burk and the worship staff at the ELCA. When I served as pastor of University Lutheran Church of Hope, Bill, the other pastors, and I would meet each Tuesday morning for worship planning—the only agenda. These conversations were rich and instructive for me and, I believe, key to the assembly's worship. Attentiveness to each part of the liturgy's relationship to the whole was Bill's particular gift, but also our shared task.

There is a sign on the exterior wall of the Walker Art Institute in Minneapolis that reads, "Bits and pieces put together to form a semblance of a whole." I am absolutely convinced that if cantors, musicians, and pastors are not engaged together in the planning of the liturgies, that is what worship becomes—bits and pieces put together to form a semblance of a whole. It is that same concern for and commitment to the interrelatedness of the parts of the liturgy and the centrality of the means of grace that has characterized Mike Burk and his worship colleagues' leadership in the ELCA Renewing Worship project. This broadly participative conversation specifically around provisional rites has been an incredibly significant contribution to the life, ministry, and mission of the ELCA. In this conversation, principles have never been a concern. In fact,

I believe all who have been in leadership in shaping Renewing Worship are deeply committed to the proposition that worship is not—cannot be—bits and pieces put together to form a semblance of a whole. Rather, in worship we become whole.

Shortly after I began to serve as presiding bishop, I spoke to a group of pastors and lay leaders in the Northern Illinois Synod. In the presentation I acknowledged that I was not yet certain what it meant to serve in this office. During the break, a pastor came up to me and said, “This is what I believe it means to be presiding bishop—you are to call us to the walls we erect as barriers to divide us from one another and help us turn those walls into tables of reconciliation.” It was as if a light went on for me. Why had I overlooked what now seemed so obvious, not only to me, but to this church in choosing the title “presiding bishop”? The call to preside over a church body begins, is defined by, and is grounded in the centrality of the call to the ministry of word and sacrament, the call to preside over the assembly gathered around the means of grace in worship. But I want to suggest that it is not only the call of a presiding bishop that is shaped in this way, but the call of each one set apart within the community of the baptized for the office of ministry of word and sacrament. Presiding shapes how we understand and exercise the pastoral office.

I will confess that something else occurred at that time in the conversation with that pastor. This may be a bit heretical or at least not politically wise to admit, but I was getting a bit weary of the Matthew 28 great commission text being quoted with such frequency (and often in abbreviated form—“go and make disciples of all nations”—leaving off “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”). It seems the *only* Matthew text that both stands as a mandate for ministry and gives form to it. With the pastor’s image of turning walls of division into tables of reconciliation, my mind went immediately to another great commission text in 2 Corinthians 5:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17-21, NRSV).

Ministry begins where God's living word of promise is read, where it is broken open in the proclamation, spoken, heard, tasted, received, and believed. In other words, our lives in and for ministry, begun in the baptized waters of God's grace, are shaped and formed as we gather at the table of the Eucharist where Christ is present as host, turning the walls of sin, hostility, and division into a table of forgiveness, reconciliation, love, and mercy, and then sending us from that table into the world with the message and ministry of reconciliation. You know this, but we often forget that the image of a presiding bishop calling us to turn walls into tables of reconciliation begins with the Eucharist.

At the suggestion of at least some on the planning committee for this event, I want to share how my understanding of the call to be presiding minister shapes how I seek to exercise the office of presiding bishop. I need to warn you that because that is how I define this call, there are more connections than I can share in the time allotted, for which you may be grateful! I will describe five ways being a presiding minister shapes serving as presiding bishop, but in so doing I am contending that the Mass shapes not only the presider, but the ministry of all the baptized. I suspect all of this is very obvious to you, but it is sometimes helpful to remind ourselves of what we already know.

To define leadership by presiding means that to be in leadership—be it presiding over the assembly in worship or over a church body, the ELCA, the LCMS, a congregation, or synod—one must be attentive to the content of the Mass.

The content of the Mass defines, shapes, and gives context to our personal and communal life, to our faith practices, to our witness, and to our work for the life of the world. If that sounds like too long a sentence to remember for the final exam, let me unpack the point with some questions—questions that as presiding bishop I, with increasing frequency, am calling this church to ponder and probe. What gospel are we proclaiming? To preside means to be very attentive to the context of the gospel. When elected presiding bishop, I suggested pastors in the ELCA not use the word “gospel” in their preaching for two years. Instead, tell the hearers the good news rather than assume the hearer knows it by our using the shorthand word “gospel.” I believe there is great temptation to succumb to proclaiming some other gospel in this culture so that we might get our market share in the growing consumer-driven religious economy defined more and more by American evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

(No, Gordon Lathrop did not write that sentence, but certainly he has informed it—thank you Dr. Lathrop!)

Perhaps you saw the *New York Times Magazine* on Easter Day. The cover story picture with Jesus as our connector—“Life on the faith-based frontier. The soul of the new exurb.” In the rapidly growing community of Surprise, Arizona, Radiant megachurch offers financial planning, athletic facilities, child care, marriage counseling, and Krispy Kremes with every sermon. Welcome to the expanding conservative frontier. Pastor McFarland’s messages are about how to reach your professional goals, discipline your children, and invest your money. If Oprah and Dr. Phil are doing it, why shouldn’t we? McFarland never talks about transforming your life through struggle, surrender, or sacrifice. He talks about being happier by accepting Jesus—into your office, your kitchen, your backyard, your marital bed, and everywhere. McFarland grew up in a Lutheran family in St. Louis. When reading that story, I thought of what Gerhard Forde wrote a few years ago in an article on Lutheran identity.

We stand at a crossroads. Either we must become more radical about the gospel or we could be better off to forget it altogether.

...what is at stake is the radical gospel, radical grace, the eschatological nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen as put in its most uncompromising and unconditional form by St. Paul.¹

Pondering Dr. Forde’s question remains relevant for us:

What shall we be? Let us be radicals, not conservatives or liberals, ‘fundagelicals’ or charismatics or whichever brand of something-less-than-gospel entices, but radicals: radical preachers and practitioners of the gospel of justification by faith without deeds of the law.²

What a stark contrast between the reported content of Pastor McFarland’s preaching and what Professor Mark Powell from Trinity Seminary talked about in a recent Bible study with the ELCA Conference of Bishops. In his study of the four gospels, Powell was unable to find any passage in which Jesus asks anyone if he might come and live in their heart. Although Professor Powell acknowledged that he often has asked Jesus into his heart, such piety is shaped more by American evangelicalism

¹Gerhard Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 8.

²Ibid, 7.

than the gospel. In the gospels, Pauline letters, and Acts it is we who are invited to live in Christ and he in us. When we are baptized into Christ, it is not a microscopic Jesus we take with us where we want him to go, but we are buried with Christ in a baptism like his, raised to newness of life in Christ—in Christ's living body. Christ then takes us where he wants us to go. Is that not precisely what is occurring in the Mass centered around the means of grace and what makes Mass, ministry, and mission inseparable?

A colleague, not at a nondenominational, exurban Wal-Mart church but a Lutheran congregation, told me recently that she does not remember the last time she heard a sermon that did not have as its central content some word of instruction for her: how to be a better parent, church member, disciple. She couldn't remember the last time she heard a word of grace. The world is longing to hear God's unconditional love in Christ proclaimed and pronounced. To preside over the assembly or over a church body means to call the assembly—the church—to be attentive to the grammar we use. My mother taught Latin and English. She taught me the grammar of grace: God is the subject and predicate—the doer of the deed and actor of the action. The whole of creation is the direct object.

If the paschal mystery is not at the center of the assembly's worship, how can we expect that the assembly, when sent into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit with the promise of the gospel, will know what it means to live the way of the cross? Absent is the centrality of the cross and resurrection. It is understandable how Pastor McFarland avoids talking about struggle, surrender, and sacrifice.

The one called to preside over the assembly in worship or over the church body in mission is called to be attentive not only to the content of the Mass, but also to the participants in the assembly's life and work.

To say it a bit differently, to preside is to be mindful of who is present and who is absent. Or yet more directly, who is welcome and on what terms, and who is excluded and for what reasons. In other words, evangelism is not the work of a committee or a strategy adopted by a churchwide assembly. I have been called to preside over an assembly—a church body—that is an evangelizing church. There is no other way to be church. This is certainly one of the many gifts and the legacy of Pope John Paul II.

Jesus was not a passive host waiting to see what guests might arrive. He was a host in the pursuit of guests. What a scandal he created by the

audacity of his inviting people to the table of the feast of God's reign of mercy and righteousness: sitting at the table with sinners, talking with a Samaritan woman in public at the well, healing on the Sabbath, touching lepers, and telling stories of the expansive embrace of God's reign of mercy and forgiveness and peace. He challenged both the rigid roles of proper and pious people and the politically powerful rules and roles that seemed more concerned with the preservation and perpetuation of their power than with an invitation to all from east and west, north and south to dine at the table in God's kingdom. Would the crucified and risen Christ expect any less from us who have the mark of his death upon our brows and have been baptized in the waters of his death and resurrection? Certainly the one who presides in the assembly is attentive to extending hospitality to the guest, looking always through the eyes of the stranger in our midst, at what we do and sing and say in the spaces in which we gather. Believe me, we have a way to go. Yet the one who presides over the assembly—the church—should be confronting and agitating the body regarding the questions, “Who is welcome here and on what terms?” and “Who is not present and why?” I literally believe we must ask those questions.

For those who say our current discussions on human sexuality and the place of gay and lesbian persons in ministry is either a culturally imposed conversation or agenda-driven by those folks in Chicago, I say you are absolutely wrong. It is the body of Christ discerning not only what it means to be stewards of God's wonderful and mysterious gift of sexuality that is given to all, but also struggling with who is welcome and on whose or what terms. Certainly we have this conversation not only in the context of the authority of scripture, but also understandably within a Lutheran doctrine of the living word of God, hermeneutical principles for interpreting the text of scripture in the context of our lives. Could it have been any more tension-creating for the early Jewish Christian conversations to struggle with whether or not Gentiles could be full members of the member of the body of Christ without being circumcised? To preside is to convene such communal conversations of discernment while welcoming the guests and sending the community out—no, leading the assembly out—to be an evangelizing church.

In an exceptional address on leadership titled, “Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require?” John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ asks, “Is the pressing question today, ‘what kinds of churches need pastors?’ or is it ‘what kind of mission needs leaders?’” He argues it is the latter when we think of

mission as *missio Dei*—God’s work in and for the sake of the world. He goes on to describe the kinds of leaders we need. “We will need leaders,” said Thomas, “who are pontiffs.” By that he means bridge-builders. Bridge-builders don’t impose uniformity; they seek to enable different communities to become diverse communities.

We will need leaders who are prophets, truth-tellers who discern truth for and within the community of faith.... We will require leaders schooled in the theological disciplines and practiced in the spiritual disciplines lest the truth that is proclaimed be merely warmed-over political agenda or social ideology with a pious veneer.... [And] we will need [leaders who are] poets.... Poets and liturgists are today’s evangelists who enable us to sense the improvisational God revealed in Jesus Christ, and lure us into the company of those who are no longer satisfied with consuming or with living as competitive strangers to one another.³

If presiding means in part being attentive to the content of the Mass and the participants in the worship’s assembly and in the church body’s life and work, then to preside certainly means also to be attentive to context—local and global, personal and cultural, spiritual and economic—in the fragile creation on the brink of ecocide.

You know this, but it does not always seem evident in how we lead and speak. We are not the body of Christ as a worshipping assembly or a denomination in isolation from each other but in relationship to each other. So, to preside is to be attentive to context and to making connections. I still maintain the Lutheran World Federation statement on worship made in November 1998 is extremely helpful. It declares our worship will always be:

- *Transcultural*, for Christ is present in all cultures, and the One whom we worship transcends all cultures;
- *Crosscultural*, for the community of the baptized spans time and space, language and class and culture (so the font, not a nation’s flag, reminds us of our unity and is the first vivid point of relevance open entering the sanctuary);
- *Contextual*, for we gather in particular places in a moment in history as a people of the incarnation; our worship and language and song

³John H. Thomas, “Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require?,” *Prism: A Theological Forum for the UCC*: 63–72.

and proclamation reflect that contextuality (some would say an argument for flags in the sanctuary);

- *Countercultural*, for there is always an “overagainstness” in worship—in the assembly’s, in the church body’s witness: Do you renounce the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?⁴

It is no secret that the ELCA is a long way from our desire to become a multicultural, diverse church reflective of the increasingly pluralistic context in which we live—urban, rural, and suburban. To preside is to challenge us to look at the racism that is imbedded in the structures of our institutions. It is to remind us what the early church in Acts experienced: that within diversity comes richness and, inevitably, a need for those persecuted to be in control. To change.

To preside is to ask, “Do our hymns and traditions and languages and liturgies preserve and transmit the culture of our immigrant ancestors, more than the living tradition of the gospel and the body of Christ through the ages? If to preside is to help the assembly—the church body—make connections, then I believe there will always be an ecumenical character and commitment in our worship and life together. I fear worship life and congregational programs are being so shaped by the needs of the consumer that we are losing this ecclesial rootedness in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Martin Marty, speaking to the ELCA Conference of Bishops, suggested that in our postmodern cultures absent of metanarratives, any sense that in our baptism we are joined to a living body that precedes, transcends, and exists beyond our earthly life is gone and will not be recovered. His analysis may be right, but as one called to preside, I will not yield and become a chaplain to a therapeutic community of individuals and families who will threaten to go elsewhere if their personal needs are not being met. Our relatedness is far deeper than that, but I fear it is being strained mightily. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this observation, still so appropriate to our context:

Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community. [They do so by] first becom[ing] accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves. Because God has already

⁴Adapted from The Lutheran World Federation, “The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities,” in *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity, LWF Studies*, ed. S. Anita Stauffer (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 24–26.

laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. The very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister becomes the moment to be taught that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.⁵

The connections made are not only with sisters and brothers in the body of Christ, but with those who suffer throughout the world. Once again I know that you know this, but I fear others have forgotten it. Luther reminded us that a fruit of the Eucharist is a community that tends to human needs, including material needs. In *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ and the Brotherhoods*, Luther describes the life-changing implications of the Eucharist:

For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others.... Thus by means of this sacrament, all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all.⁶

He elaborates further:

In times past this sacrament was so properly used, and the people were taught to understand this fellowship so well, that they even gathered food and material goods in the church, and there—as St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11—distributed among those who were in need.... This has all disappeared, and now there remain only the many masses and the many who receive this sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies.... They will not help the poor, put up with sinners, care for the sorrowing, suffer with the suffering, intercede for others, defend the truth, and at the risk of [their own] life, property, and honor seek the betterment of the church and of all Christians.⁷

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 92.

⁶Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods” (1519), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 35:58, 67.

⁷*Ibid.*, 35:57.

The one who presides over the assembly and as bishop over the church will always be calling us to public character of all that we do and are.

When we are in worship we are engaged in a public act. We, as the ELCA, are a public church. What does this mean? It means we are open to all, gathered on behalf of all, and are sent for the sake of all for the life of the world. I fear that sense is often lacking in worship—that we have gathered in Christ before the throne of God’s grace on behalf of the whole creation. Perhaps that would become clearer if lament was more central to our worship and public life. Cynthia Moe-Lubeda in her marvelous work *Public Church for the Life of the World* quotes ethicist Emilie Townes in describing leadership in public lament. In a sermon on the Book of Joel, Townes claims that for people living in covenant relationship with God, social healing begins with communal lament. Listen to Townes:

If we learn anything from Joel
it is to know that the healing of brokenness and injustice
the healing of social sin and degradation
the healing of spiritual doubts and fears
begins with an unrestrained lament ...
It’s a lament of faith
to the God of faith
that we need help
that we cannot do this ministry alone
we can’t witness to the world in isolation
we can’t fight off the hordes of wickedness and hatred with a big stick
we can’t do this by ourselves anymore, God
we need ... divine help.⁸

Moe-Lobeda continues, “Communal lament, as Townes explains it, is the assembly crying out in distress to the God in whom it trusts ... Deep and sincere ‘communal lament ... names problems, seeks justice, and hopes for God’s deliverance. Lament, as seen in the book of Joel, forms people; it requires them to give name and words to suffering,”⁹ Not just lament, but communal discernment will mark the life of a public church, and it is into discernment I believe we who preside are to call this

⁸Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 12, quoted in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church for the Life of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 68.

⁹Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church for the Life of the World*, 68.

church—not only discernment as church, but communal discernment as citizens in a civil society. As you know, if you were at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee or will be in Orlando, I believe the centerpiece of the assembly’s life and work is to gather at the middle of the day for worship. Only from that liturgy of the assembly gathered around the means of grace, making confession and intercession, singing our praises, hearing the word read and proclaimed, the meal celebrated, and baptism remembered can we continue the work of the people in plenary discussions and actions. Presiding over the assembly’s debates and discernment follow from presiding over the assembly’s worship. Again, to preside is to tend to our communal discernment. I call your attention once more to Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s words:

Could it be that communal lament is a key to the social healing in the publics in which this church is called to minister? Who is more suited to lament and call forth public lament than a people of the cross, a people called to be present where life is broken, where people suffer, where the earth groans? Who is more equipped to face and lament social agony—rather than deny it—than a people who know that ultimately the power of God’s love will reign? ... When and how might worship be the public processing of grief and pain regarding societal, ecological, and individual brokenness? When and how might this public church open doors to public lament?¹⁰

Yet the moral universe expands beyond the human to encompass earth, skies, and the biophysical and geoplanetary spheres of life. Moe-Lobeda continues:

Luther insists that Christ actually is present not only in believing communities, but in all created things. Nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power. God exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all and outside all created things. Everything is full of Christ through and through. All creatures are permeable and present to Christ. Christ fills all things. Christ is around us and in us in all places. He is present in all creatures and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in rope, for he is certainly there. While, for Luther, the scope of redemption of the theo-ethical universes is the human—and these are fault lines with grave consequences—the scope of God’s blessed creaturehood *in whom God dwells* and the scope of revelation are cosmic.¹¹

Christ as boundless love, living and loving not only the assembly of believers but also the rest of creation summons the church to learn ways of hearing and heeding the “witness” of others than human creatures and

¹⁰Ibid., 68–69.

¹¹Ibid., 55.

elements. I, as presiding bishop, must speak and challenge the church to find its public voice.

To preside is to lead individuals, a community, a church body seeking to discern and to discover purpose and meaning.

Our context gives ample evidence that people are on such a quest. Rick Warren, author of the popular *Purpose Driven Life*, is a good example. Our response begins as the assembly gathers to worship. Listen once again to something Mark Powell has said: “One time someone asked Jesus, ‘What is the greatest commandment of all?’ He didn’t say, ‘Oh, there are lots of commandments and they are all equally important.’ He said, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. Everything flows from it, including the second commandment—love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Purpose is formed in worship. Can it be stated any more clearly than in the question the presiding minister asks those affirming their baptism:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following to the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?¹²

Purpose: can it be any clearer than in the sending? Go in peace; share the good news. Go in peace; serve the risen Christ. Go in peace; remember the poor.

Purpose: can it be any clearer than to go from the table of the Eucharist to the walls of fear and barriers of division in our lives and households, church, world? We are sent to turn those walls into tables of reconciliation. It is our shared, holy calling. We’ve got work to do.

¹²Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia, PA: Board of Publications, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 201.