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Being the Body of Christ

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Being the Body of Christ

Thank you to Jennifer, Brian and Doreen for your coordination and hospitality. And to all our plenary presenters, Max, Paul and Craig, and to all the workshop leaders, it is an honor to be with you.

Indeed it is good to be with all of you on this second week of Easter.

“My Lord and my God,” Thomas said. That this conference takes place under the halo of the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Easter is fitting. In the Gospel of John, Thomas is the first and only to profess that Jesus is God. “My Lord *AND* my God.” There is something deeply appropriate about Thomas’ revelation that Jesus is God as the reading that sets up the 50-days of mystagogy after baptism.

Throughout the baptismal preparation time for catechumens, there is a back and forth, a persistent quest to explore the person of Jesus Christ in scripture and how our life is caught up in Jesus, in Christ (as Paul might say).

Now in this Second Week, post baptism, for many. The newly baptized hear Thomas’ profession. “My Lord...and...my God.” Transformation. New Creation. It is. It is good. Life in Christ.

This dual profession is more important than ever.

One of the scholars captivating much attention today is Charles Taylor. In his book, *A Secular Age*, written in 2007, Taylor claims that we live in an age “in which all belief systems are contestable and any claim of divine action is questioned.” The church’s current issue may be less about the fact that people aren’t coming to church, but instead, “people no longer have ways to imagine the possibility of divine action or transcendence.” (Root, x)

Last year, my colleague and friend, Andrew Root, published a book called *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*. In this book, Andy traces the frustrations many have with fostering faith formation across the multiple generations that make up our congregations of the 21st century.

While many of us as church professionals spend our time chasing after the perfect programing to capture people’s attention so that faith can occupy more space in modern life, most people are preoccupied with what Taylor calls the search for authenticity – experiences are deeply meaningful and encounters with reality should mean something.

Reality is, for the most part, flat in this secular age. Our lives are bound within an immanent frame and the world is disenchanted. Transcendence and divine action are impossibilities.

Root takes time to trace the three frames that Taylor proposes:

- Secular 1 – prior to the Reformation, Western people believed that the sacred and the secular belonged on separate planes. “Transcendence was a reality for the every day person, but every day people had to go to holy places and visit holy people to encounter the presence of God.”
- Secular 2 – in this period the divide between the sacred and the secular disappeared. Now they are each their own spheres within the temporal world. One space contending not to lose ground to the other. This is why we count hours and mark levels of participation. Faith

formation programs seek to occupy space in people's lives in order for faith to take hold. Faith itself is bound within material space.

- Secular 3 – in this period, transcendence and divine action become unbelievable. Experience and authentic within the material world are triumphant. Turf wars about the secular and spiritual space give way to shrugged shoulders or outright judgement. "You believe what?"

What Root notes is that what we experience as impossibility, isn't, however. The immanent is not bound. Rather, time and time again, divine action happens in our lives.

Root calls this (following Taylor) cross-pressure. (The play on cross is intentional for Root.)

"By giving attention to People's experience of cross-pressure, to the echoes of transcendence they experience (but doubt), to the very ways they get crossed up in the immanent frame, we may find ways to perceive the transcendent and seek divine action." (Root, 114)

Tending to the echoes of transcendence.

Transcendence becomes possible because of ministry – rooted in Jesus' call to love – which will appear in the Revised Common lectionary later this month on the Fifth Sunday of Easter.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:12-13)

Ministry is...love of neighbor.

Andy Root and I talked about ministry, faith, life and divine action daily on our commute to our doctoral seminars at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2003. Andy and his wife Kara lived next door to my husband Chris and me in the married student housing. Andy and Kara were our neighbors when our first daughter was born. We were right next door when their son was born.

My reflections on faith and daily life took me on the path to explore the catechumenate. Although I had encountered the Easter Vigil in my childhood, I didn't fully encounter the catechumenate as a practice until Seminary. In liturgy class with Gordon Lathrop at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, we spent time exploring the catechumenate through a liturgical frame. At the same time, I was taking classes with Dr. Lathrop I was also taking classes on Martin Luther's Small Catechism with Dr. Timothy Wengert and Christian Education classes with the extraordinary theologian, Dr. Margaret Krych.

I started my doctoral work at Princeton Theological Seminary in Christian Education with two potential projects – one on the use of catechisms in congregations today and then other on the catechumenate as a faith formation process. A Lilly Endowment grant to Princeton which funded primary research in congregations afforded me the opportunity to study Christian practice and led me to my choice. I decided to research how exactly Christian discipleship was learned through the catechumenate process – for as we know Christians are made not born.

I spent 2004 and 5 traveling around the country interviewing catechumens, catechist and pastors at Lutheran congregations. In my line of questioning I would ask sponsors, catechists and pastors, why they thought the catechumenate was a helpful process for making disciples. Almost every time the

leader would tell me what the catechumenate was not. It was not a program. It was not indoctrination. It was not.

I asked quickly. What is the catechumenate? The catechumenate leaders would respond – it's an experience. It's a process. You just have to jump in to understand. It's real/authentic.

These Lutheran congregations had a common language for inviting newcomers into the catechumenal process: We have a way.

- 1) We have a way to welcome you.
- 2) We have a way to explore your questions about Jesus and the Christian faith.
- 3) We have a way to help you discern God's calling and live out that calling in daily life.

In catechumenal formation the sponsor and catechist lean into the inquirer's questions of doubt, despair and suffering, by placing these questions at the foot of the cross where ultimate questions are met by God's promise.

Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Jesus said, "Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Thomas answered: "My Lord and my God."

Catechumenate leaders knew how to curate faith in the experiential, meaning-making, authentic frame of Taylor's secular age.

And they resisted the easy responses. Many of these practitioners could have written parts of Kate Bowler's new book: *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. Catechumenal formation at the foot of the cross is where doubt is met by faith, despair is met by hope, and suffering is met with love.

At the center of the catechumenal process were strong practices – authentic and earnest prayer, thoughtful engagement with Scripture -- the source and norm of faith – in relationship to daily life, vibrant and transcendent worship, alongside ministry modeled through the relationships between inquirers, sponsors and catechists.

Learning to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, participants in the catechumenate process learned practices of the Christian life. Not for the sake of the practices. But as a way to respond to God's action in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian practices are the means to love God and love neighbor – are the means for ministry.

My academic work sought to provide a frame that captured how these catechumenal leaders were trying to describe the catechumenate process.

At just the right time, my doctoral professor, Richard Osmer, put the book that I needed before me. It was called "Situated Learning" by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Lave and Wenger described learning as a social process, that is fundamentally rooted in the relationships between people. In particular they

studied the apprentice relationships of midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers and recovering alcoholics to study the way people learn social practices of a trade or community. Wenger expounded on this theory in his book called, *Communities of Practice*.

As you can see from this diagram, there are four components of the social learning theory: community, identity, meaning and practice.

- Through community – our contributions are worthy, and our competence is valued.
 - Learning is belonging.
- Through identity – we learn who we are and our stories are woven into the fabric of the community’s narrative of itself.
 - Learning is becoming.
- Through meaning – individually and collectively we experience life and the world as meaningful, and ever-adapting.
 - Learning is experience.
- Through practice – we encounter the shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
 - Learning is doing.

Practices are social – they happen in community.

Practices shape identity

Practices facilitate our participation in community.

Practices encourage belonging.

Learning happens as we participate meaningfully in social practice.

Over time participants within practices develop competence.

Competence leads to belonging and identity formation.

Catechumenate congregations held these practices as central to their community’s life of faith.

Newcomers were welcomed into a process in which they were prayed for and they were encouraged to pray, they engaged scripture through processes that privileged the interpretation of the community of the present and the community of the saints, worship attendance was encouraged and expected but worship was also broken open and interpreted. Ministry happened both within the catechumenal process and beyond – in the congregation and in mission.

Central to Lave and Wenger’s social learning theory is the place of newcomers within the community.

Newcomers are not bystanders. Newcomers are extended legitimate peripheral participation.

What does this mean?

Legitimate peripheral participation means that newcomers are welcome to observe actively. They do not need to hide their curiosity, their gaze or their stare. Newcomer observations are important to normalize as apart of the way people imagine their way into a community.

LPP is not one Sunday. The whole of the catechumenate process could be considered a peripheral process for newcomers to linger around the edges of the community. Time is given liberally and full

participation is not forced. During this time the newcomer is invited to learn about the people involved in the practice and the type of resources available to support the practice.

LPP provides access to the community as the newcomer builds competence....which may lead to belonging.

Newcomers know where the boundaries are. Boundaries are clear indications of non-participation. Newcomers know when they are or are not welcome to participate. Often, these boundaries are intuited. Rather than ignoring non-participation signals, it is important for communities to recognize where non-participation exists and help set up expectations for full participation in the future.

Insiders are full participants.
Outsiders are full non-participants.

Through legitimate peripheral participation non-participation is still participation – and the newcomer’s trajectory is leading to full or ongoing peripheral participation.

The opposite experience is marginality. In this case participation is restricted by non-participation. The newcomer’s clearly not encouraged to become a full participant and is instead marginalized.

Oftentimes, congregations want to gloss over the barriers to participation. Catechumenal congregations heighten these barriers, setting high expectations for discipleship while simultaneously carrying out a process that allows for full participation.

Barriers are the place where good arguments happen. In fact, figuring out what discipleship looks like is the task of every Christian community. The goal is not in figuring it out one and for all, because it will never be that easy. Rather, catechumenal communities make central the very practice of argument about the central practices of faith that matter for the identify formation of the community. Catechumenal congregation hold on to an ethos of inquiry at the core of their identity. Curiosity and wonder a central characteristics of these congregations.

Who are newcomers?

Newcomers have arrived recently.

Whether newcomers are new is relative to other newcomers and other oldcomers.

Who are newcomers?

Unbaptized adults

Active and baptized moving to a new congregation

Inactive baptized

Sometimes called visitor or frequent visitor

Who are oldcomers?

Oldcomers have been around for a while.

Whether oldcomers are old is relative to other oldcomers and other newcomers.

Who are oldcomers?

Active and over-committed
Active
Less than active
Less active than those who are less than active (inactive?)

These feel like normative judgements in secular 2. But in secular 3 they are realities to be engaged. Catechumenal practitioners honor this reality.

Three cases from my current home congregation:

(First, I must tell you that the catechumenate is not formalized in my home congregation, but the spirit of catechumenal formation and the language of facilitating newcomer participation is:

Becky, Greg and their kids

John and Lilly

Jim and Barb

Whether you are a newcomer or an oldcomer is dependent upon the length of time you spend in the community;

The more time you experience in the community, the more familiar you become with the history and practices of the community.

Newcomers and oldcomers together are the body of Christ.

In catechumenal formation – access is key. Newcomers need oldcomers and here's the thing, oldcomers need newcomers to learn how to be Jesus followers.

Why?

Because newcomers ask questions and lead with curiosity, which re-ignites the curiosity and wonder of the oldcomers.

This is why catechumenal formation is not a dress rehearsal for discipleship, but is discipleship itself. Catechumenal formation is ministry – the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those who need to hear it most.

The catechumenate facilitates newcomer participation in the central practices of discipleship alongside oldcomers.

Yet, that is not all. Where the catechumenate thrives is when leaders tend to the relationships between newcomers and oldcomers – where leaders tend to the ministry that occurs between newcomers and oldcomers.

This model allows for what actually happens in congregations. There is a fluidity of participation, at varying levels depending upon where people are in their lives. A social learning theory, honors this lived reality. People have seasons in which their full participation is limited or peripheral. Others may have changes in which full participation is enable and more possible. This is reality.

How do we facilitate peripheral participation?

Provide access to discourses and resources.

Discourse – why we do what we do

Resources – what we do and how we do it

Discourses

The means of Grace - the promise – God encounters.

Resources

Central practices of discipleship that sustain faith, and identity as disciples, and belonging within the community.

What do newcomers need in order to participate more frequently and feel as though they belong?

Need more than what congregations typically give.

Newcomers need encouragement to participate in central faith practices of the congregation.

Newcomers need time to develop competence within these practices.

Newcomers need access to discourses and resources of established members.

The ecclesia crucis (The church of the cross) is life together at the foot of the cross.

This is not the immanent frame.

This life together expects echoes of transcendence because God shows up in the dress rehearsal.

The ecclesia crucis confesses faith, hope and love, welcoming all to participate in central practices where faith meets doubt, hope meets despair and love meets the suffering world.

Within the ecclesia crucis, oldcomers entertain and appreciate the disarticulations of newcomers.

Disarticulations are where new meaning arises.

Last month we had our first Vacation Bible School leaders meeting.

I want to share Kelleen's story with you.

Kelleen had been a longtime member. A family crisis had kept her away from the congregation for some time. I am the Vacation Bible School volunteer coordinator in our congregation. Last year we had 70 youth and adults offer to help with our VBS which had 70 kids. I like a 1-to-1 ratio. In order to facilitate participation. In going over my list of possible people to help, I came across Kelleen's name. I searched for her and after a couple weeks found her after worship and asked her if she would help with VBS. "I like telling stories," she said.

TGIF

Story with Kelleen and Michelle re: Bible Story center.

On Sunday after TGIF, she said to me, Jess these TGIF kids need more biblical stories as the foundation of their life. Yup...you are my next catechist.

Kelleen as an oldcomer/newcomer is disarticulating experiences through her presence in the community. This is what facilitating participation is all about.

Faithful living is doubt-filled living; seeking promise when engaging ultimate questions.
Hopeful living requires the means of grace; courage to face despair.
Cruciform love enters, holds and attends to the suffering of one's neighbor.

Questions of the ecclesia crucis:

- 1) For what in your life are you seeking promise?
- 2) For what in your life are you seeking courage?
- 3) For what in your life are you seeking forgiveness, mercy and steadfast love?

"My Lord and my God!"

Newcomers bear the Gospel.