A Life Patterned on Worship

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Our lives are patterned on many things, but few of us would leap to claim Christian worship as our primary model. However, the church and the world might benefit from our exploration of this possibility of liturgy and ethics joined in a loving embrace. Our comfort level among ourselves with conversations about what happens in public worship is fairly high. If the number of books written on the subject since the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982 is a measure of anything, surely it discloses an ecumenical revolution in our openness to a shared discovery and renewal of what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth.

We debate with candor what constitutes the full and responsible shape or *ordo* of worship and spiritual formation received from faithful believers who preceded us. At our best, this gift from the cloud of witnesses reminds us that we are not the first Christians and dare not assume we will be the last. We are bridge-Christians on a multicultural planet handing on to tomorrow's church the transfiguring faith once delivered to the saints that makes us the universal church in our time.

Our comfort level diminishes somewhat when we move past the benediction and ponder what living the liturgy looks like in daily life. What does it mean to link inseparably what we celebrate in the public worship of the triune God with how we conduct our individual and corporate lives? Scripture is emphatic in its insistence that there can be no wall of separation between how we honor God and how we treat our neighbors and the creation given from God's hand. Whatever else a liturgical benediction or dismissal is, it is not license to forget on Monday morning that every human being is an icon of God and that the creation itself yearns for cosmic redemption.

It troubled John Calvin at first glance when he noticed that the prophet Micah (6:8) reversed the two tables of the Ten Commandments in answering "What does the Lord require of you?" He wrote, "For although the worship of God has precedence and ought rightly to come first, yet justice which is practiced among men [*sic*] is the true evidence of devotion to God. The prophet therefore names here justice and compassion . . . because (God) is here defining true religion by its manifestations."[1]

In God's eyes, for us to be just and compassionate is to "walk humbly with God" and honor the first table of the law. To minister to a person in need, as

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Jesus reminds us in the dialogue of Matthew 25, is a doxological act. Through the relief of a neighbor's pain or other necessity, our justice and compassion are received as well by the risen word made flesh. Every act for the sake of justice and compassion, whether done quietly or reported in the headlines of the world, is an ethical *Te Deum* resounding to the glory of God.

Liturgy and Ethics Produce Social Consequences

One of the guidelines used in preparation of the *Book of Worship* of the United Church of Christ (UCC) reads, "worship cannot be separated from ethics. Liturgy . . . includes not only what we do when we gather for what is narrowly called 'worship' but *all* we do as persons baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."[2] The UCC's engagement with social justice issues from its earliest history, including its witness against slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and recent General Synod actions supporting marriage rights for same-gender couples, is a sign of its struggle to live an ethic shaped by the gospel promise that "God so loved the world," all of it all the time.

Diverse denominations face similar struggles wherever an ethic of inclusion, of extravagant welcome rooted in the radical embrace offered by Jesus Christ, becomes a hallmark of Christian hospitality. Our usual labels for one another—evangelical, conservative, moderate, liberal—sometimes spoken with contempt, melt in a maze of mercy when we see past divisive issues into the expectant hearts of contemporary outcasts. The descendants of Zacchaeus, the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet, and the woman accused of adultery are not all *out there*, but incognito inside many of us and within our congregations.

Today, I read the words of a pastor of a self-styled conservative evangelical church. When asked whether gay or lesbian persons are welcome in his vibrant congregation, he acknowledged that parts of the Bible are interpreted by some to exclude such persons. Then he added, "But we're all at a different stage. We don't push anybody away" and concluded, "let's not be the cosmic police."[3]

It is refreshing and amazing to notice that conservative Christians who once abhorred mixing religion and politics are now frequently in the press making a case for some matter of conscience that knows no such boundary. Liberal Christians, known for their refusal of any such absolute boundary, are now adamant about the urgency not to collapse religion and politics into one undifferentiated mass. This shift has opened strange if distant alliances that seek in common to allow no quarter of life to be isolated from the heart of a caring God. For example, Pat Robertson recently agreed to support the use of condoms in African nations suffering from the HIV/AIDS pandemic though he believes abstinence is required with respect to premarital sex. And denominations known as liberal have opposed the federal Faith-Based Initiatives program that allows the use of tax funds by religious bodies engaged in community work while endorsing that work as an expression of the gospel.

Many of us find it easier to believe the miracles of Jesus long ago than the miracles Jesus calls the church to actualize in today's world. A generation ago

George A. Buttrick warned that what we do or fail to do liturgically in our Sunday worship has societal consequences. For Christians, the city of God and the secular city occupy the same real estate. Buttrick, after reminding us that "we derive greatness from (God's) greatness—by worship, by prayer, by obedience to (God's) will," continues, "Thus the decline of worship has been a much more fertile cause of the cheapening of human life" than modern science or secular challenges.[4] This view changes the vista we see from the mountaintop of faithful worship. What is at stake is not simply the corporate reverence and adoration we offer to God, but the solace and redress we offer in God's name to a wounded world.

Grounded in the Author of All Truth

If worship and daily life are so inextricably woven in the one fabric of Christian discipleship, why are we tempted to treat them as separate and distinct? One of the reasons lies in our fear of facing the practical social implications, the Monday morning *so what*, of our communal foray into the awesome presence of God. Could it be that much of Protestant worship today, influenced more by the entertainment industry than the *ordo* of the church's heritage, wins accolades precisely because it tames the mystery inherent in our encounter with God? To the extent that this occurs, the dispersed church is compromised in its ability to speak truth to power because it is not adequately grounded in the one who is the author of all truth.

In a similar way, if the church mistakes the secular use of the vocabulary of our faith for a sign that the gospel is broadly accepted in our culture, then there is every reason to fear that what has triumphed is not the gospel but the culture that has domesticated it. We live in an era of political speech that sounds more religious than what some of us hear on Sunday morning. This trivialization and politicizing of our words of faith is as dangerous as the famed Trojan horse. It gives the appearance of friendly address but masks the hostility of ideology that lodges deeply within the words.

Of course the opposite tendency is even more seductive. Those who seem to know with certitude what is going on in faithful worship and who guard the *ordo* as a cherished possession may see little or no connection between sacred speech or acts and mundane ethics. Although we welcome the rejoining of the proclamation of the word with the celebration of the Eucharist each Sunday in the current liturgical revival, all is not liturgically accomplished when the worshipers go home. Alexander Schmemann once lamented the captivity of the sacred meal itself where, for some, "the receiving of communion is becoming for them the 'one thing needful,' the self-sufficient goal and content of their churchly life."[5]

A more recent Eastern Orthodox voice challenges us to see "religious education as a liturgy before the liturgy" that prepares us not only for worship but for "liturgy after the liturgy." He writes, "'Liturgy after the Liturgy' means that renewed by the holy communion and the Holy Spirit, members of the church are sent to be an authentic testimony to Jesus Christ in the world . . . to confess the gospel and to be involved in humanity's liberation."[6]

The very identity of the church is shaped by sacred speech that resists

becoming a foreign language in the place where it is uttered. In this paradoxical sense, a life patterned on worship is of necessity a life lived under the word and in the vernacular. Our belief in the incarnation demands the perpetual scandal of historical particularity. While guarding words of faith from the diminishment of secularized co-optation, believers are called to articulate the gospel in word and deed as concretely and indigenously as possible. Their witness points not to themselves or their culture or their language but to the Word eternally begotten by God.

Is participation in the corporate worship of the church adequate to prepare Christians for the demanding vocation of being salt, light, and leaven for the sake of the reign of God in daily life? Even if it were, and there is reason to doubt that it is, why neglect the rich treasury of the larger *ordo*, with word and sacrament at its heart? Said another way, should we be surprised when corporate worship seems to catch those in attendance unaware when for the six or more days between gatherings they are left to fend for themselves?

Whatever else informs this approach, it is not congruent with our spiritual formation roots in the synagogue and early church. Weekday gatherings of the faithful, the study of scripture in common, prayer at given times of each day, fasting, charitable care of neighbors, and an understanding of the home as a domestic expression of the community of faith were indelible marks of the seven-days-a-week people of God.

Experiential Unity Via a Shared Lectionary

One sign of our rediscovery of this larger *ordo* is the remarkable degree to which the lectionary has won the hearts of diverse Christians. The Roman Catholic three-year lectionary of 1969, expanded and revised by the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) in 1983 and 1992, is used broadly in mainline churches. In the United Church of Christ, which cannot mandate resources for worship in local churches, a recent study shows that 95 percent of clergy use the *Revised Common Lectionary* (RCL), up from 67 percent in 1990, in some form as they prepare worship. The existence of this ecumenical lectionary has birthed uncounted Bible study groups and published resources that focus on the three scriptural readings and psalm for each Sunday. The awareness that the same readings are being shared in common on the same Sundays among millions of believers worldwide has brought a new sense of solidarity among Christians that gives new meaning to Christian unity in a yet divided church.

Although it was not anticipated in the early days of this shared lectionary, its very existence raised a hunger for a daily lectionary that integrates with the Sunday and Holy Day readings. If the role of scripture is central to patterning our lives on worship, then a discipline for reading the Bible in common each day recommends itself with transparent value. Gail Ramshaw independently authored such an integrated lectionary, *Between Sundays*, with one reading per day in 1997. The Consultation on Common Texts, with her permission, revised and expanded her work to two readings each day and additional psalms, and published the new resource (with Augsburg Fortress) under the title *Daily Readings* in November of 2005.

The design of this resource calls for the week of readings to begin on Thurs-

day and end on Wednesday, with the *Revised Common Lectionary* readings for Sunday literally at the center. In order to allow much more of the Bible to speak than might otherwise be possible, redundancy has been avoided and parts of scripture often overlooked are included. Of the twelve readings for weekdays, six are from the Old Testament, four from the epistles (Thursday, Friday, Monday, Tuesday) and two from the gospels (Saturday and Wednesday). The psalm for Sunday is used from Thursday through Sunday and a new psalm is assigned to Monday through Wednesday. In the total collection all 150 psalms are used at least in part.

If the vocabulary of our faith is essential to a daily life patterned on worship, then daily exposure to scripture that is the written fountain of our faith holds great potential for nurturing the people of God. Familiarity with the stories of our faith holds the promise of opening our eyes not only to how God touched the lives of our forbears but how God is present in our world today. The reading of this narrative in common lends a communal solidarity to the discipline even if we are meditating in solitude.

The Liturgical Year, The *Ordo*, and Daily Prayer

A related gift accompanies comprehensive lectionary work. Through this endeavor the liturgical year, previously a source of confusion in its diverse ordering, has been brought to harmonious expression while allowing for diversity. Through the simple numbering of Sundays in ordinary time or the assignment of numbers for propers, the churches of the Roman Catholic and Reformation traditions are able to move through the church year together.

What are the practical implications of these insights and resources for those who want to experience the blessings and challenges of worship as a pattern for life itself? To begin, the *ordo* of word and sacrament, the shape of how we celebrate corporate worship in continuity with the church of the ages, is a drama that begs to tutor our daily lives.

When we retire each night and awaken each morning in the love and care of God are we not rehearsing the great mystery of our eventual requiem and resurrection? When we open our eyes at dawn, do we greet only a new day as seen by secular eyes or do we greet God who gives us all our days? Can we truly arise from sleep if we miss the awe of divine presence in our first glimpse of the unspoiled day now in our care? In the act of awakening we are at a threshold of adoration and praise not unlike what marks the opening of our corporate worship. If what happens at the beginning of corporate worship seems timid or uninspiring, perhaps the fault is not in the liturgy for that occasion but in our unpreparedness born of too many mornings from which we have exiled God.

Each part of our liturgical worship has great potential for rehearsal in our daily lives. Who among us does not need to say "I am sorry" to someone or "I forgive you" or "thank you" or "may I help you"? And if we feel no need to say such things, what does that reveal about our spiritual state of health? We can learn from others how to exercise the priesthood of all believers if we are willing to open our lives to their needs and gifts. Pastors learn this each time they complain inwardly about yet one more visit on a busy day to a nursing

home or homebound saint only to leave the visit knowing they themselves feel energized and blessed. There are serendipities beyond count in our acts of compassion and grace.

Few things can open the windows of heaven more powerfully than including in our daily lives the prayers of others. For an entire year I meditated each day on a different prayer offered by African American sisters and brothers. The candor, splendor, and pain of many of those prayers often changed my day. Although few of the writers knew me personally it was clear that they knew me nonetheless in the bias and racism they addressed in the inner chamber of my heart. In a similar way, it can be liberating to focus each day on the saints acknowledged in our various traditions. The stories of their lives intersect with our own more poignantly than much of what we read in our daily newspapers.

Patterning our life on worship requires both intentionality and openness to the surprises of God. Most of us have to learn how to pray the daily office or other devotional material while riding the subway or sitting by a talkative passenger on a plane or caring for a child. The distractions are often epiphanies in disguise. They make the parable of the compassionate Samaritan come to life before our eyes. On reflection, the interruption is often an occasion for entertaining angels unaware.

Nonetheless, although the surprises are not in our control the intentionality is. When I can manage it, my place of daily prayer is my study in a room whose books surround me with an embrace by familiar friends. The art and symbols there are signposts of a journey that unites earth and heaven. Occasionally, when the reasons are beyond my grasp, I experience the rush of what some call goose bumps accompanied by a rush of inexplicable emotion. In those moments it is my faith that the gate of heaven is not as far away as I had supposed. The experience is similar to the hush that sometimes comes over a congregation at worship when, in the midst of doing what has been done many times before, God is known to be awesomely present.

When we move from these times of daily prayer and reflection to whatever marketplace beckons us, we are no less sent into the world than at the dismissal on Sunday mornings. Encountering a panhandler moments after our "amen" may be an immersion in the human sea of pressing need. It can be jolting. One afternoon, just as I was trying to clear my church desk and get ready for an Ash Wednesday service, a person from the street appeared at my door to ask for bread. We talked for ten minutes and I arranged for him to have a meal at a local restaurant. He returned later with a gift which he sat in our sanctuary to create. It was a poem for Ash Wednesday that only a believer who has practiced the presence of God could write. He lacked the popular features but he was to me an angel unaware and his poem graced our service that evening.

The Nexus Between Worship and Daily Life

The nexus between worship and daily life is often jarring not because the two stand in antithesis but because we stand in the way of their joining. At a discussion on what should be done with bread and wine left over after holy

communion, an American in the ecumenical group complained about investing the elements with magical powers and treating them as more than bread and wine. A voice from the two-thirds world and its poverty responded patiently and agreed that magic was of no interest. He went on to ask how it can be that many in the affluent northern hemisphere can be so wasteful of food when millions go hungry every day. With passion in his voice, he begged that we not extend our waste to the holy bread and wine of the communion table no matter how we regard the consecrated elements. At least here, he said, at the table of Christ where we are made one, prepare only what is needed, and eat and drink reverently all that is set before the people of God. Throw away nothing.

This appeal reminds us that the Eucharist itself is an enacted sign of ethical responsibility that pervades Christian discipleship in a world hungering not only for food but for God. Both hungers summon us to lives patterned on faithful liturgy or, in the words of Paul, to self-giving service that is "holy and acceptable to God, which is (our) spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1 NRSV).

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Notes

1. *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. and trans. Joseph Haroutunian, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 23 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 316.
2. Thomas E. Dipko, *The Symbols, Space and Sanctity of the Place of Worship* (Cleveland: United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, n.d.), 5.
3. Frank Bentayou, "Breaking Out of the Mold, Gathering in the Fold," *The Plain Dealer*, July 9, 2005, E5.
4. George A. Buttrick, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," *Interpreter's Bible,* vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 372.
5. Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology,* trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse (London: The Faith Press LTD, 1966), 37.
6. Vladimir Fedorov, "Non Scholae, Sed Vitae Discimus," *The Ecumenical Review,* vol. 57 (January 2005): 43.

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