

*What in the world do those people think they're doing?* That was one of the questions that opened my mind to a reconsideration of the liturgy. The question comes from Rick Fabian, the co-founder of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco. The question comes from his experience of visiting an Episcopal Church while he was on holiday, sitting in the back of the church, and just observing. The question is related to the one you sometimes hear: what would a group of aliens from a distant world think if they landed their spacecraft in the middle of a baseball game? As leaders in the church, we hold a privileged position within the institution; we hold a great deal of the information that is needed for planning, producing and evaluating liturgy. And like most insiders we share a common jargon or shorthand for talking about the art of liturgy. But in creating liturgy for the assembly, or leading the assembly to create and perform its liturgy, are we working in the direction of clarity or obscurity? Are we working in the direction of the Gospel or of the Empire? Are we working in a way that is winsome or just a job that has to get done?

How can the liturgy make a real difference in the lives of people? How can the liturgy speak in a language that can be understood in a culture that is growing more and more disconnected from a world of religious privilege? And most importantly, how can the liturgy transform people in their day-to-day lives?

I am not interested in telling you the right way to do liturgy. Perhaps the least helpful thing I could bring is a replicable project or program for you take home with you. Instead, the project of articulating principles and values of liturgy has to be something that is portable and can be contextualized in many different liturgical settings. If there were a “right” way to do liturgy, then the project would automatically devolve into a conversation about taste. Instead, I wanted to articulate a set of principles that provide a platform upon which any style of liturgy can be constructed.

We must understand the sacraments as firmly rooted in the free gift of God’s grace to people of all faiths - or no faith at all. The sacraments are the events where the extravagant gift of love is experienced in the lives of people. It is from the sacraments that we discover who we are as a community. We are none other than God’s friends, as are all human beings. We are made friends of God by the loving service of Christ. Friendship with God comes freely. It comes as an expression of the eternal love that is God the Holy Trinity. And it comes with an expectation that our lives will be transformed in God’s love. Transformation happens in our relationships within the community.

In paying attention to what is happening when the community gathers to celebrate the sacraments, we come to understand how the liturgy can for the people of God more fully into the image of Christ. This is a classically Anglican position: experience always precedes opinion. When we worship together, we learn how to worship together. It’s a little bit like learning how to fly an airplane while you’re still building it.

The sacraments are about transformation. They call us, continually, to open ourselves to conversion. People sometimes like change and sometimes they don’t like it.

Whether or not you like change is not the issue here. Sometimes change is difficult, sometimes it is easy. A lot of times we resist change because we are immune to it. Sometimes we're resistant because we fear that change will bring conflict, and we don't want to deal with conflict. And change can result in conflict, but so can stasis. Sometimes we rush to embrace change for the sake of novelty; innovation that is expressed without consideration of the context in which the change is taking place. As a friend of mine has said, we spend too much time looking for the killer app that will save the church. We must learn to value change not for its own sake or for the sake of novelty. Change only makes sense when it is framed as transformation or the conversion of life. This kind of change happens when the liturgy is designed and performed in a way that embraces flexibility and welcomes newness.

The sacraments also require us to welcome mystery. The liturgy is a container for mystery or field upon which mystery plays. The mystery at play with us is the mystery of God, present and active in the assembly coming to us in sacramental reality. This is the reality that the sacraments can open to our consciousness. But if the assembly is not invited into conversion of life, if the assembly is rendered unconscious in one way, or another, then access to the mystery of God's presence is elusive. We want mystery, but we fear it. So we rely on old tricks to make it seem that something mysterious is happening in the liturgy. We lift the altar high above and far from the people. We insist on a ritual action that separates as much as draws people to the holy. We construct or allow fences within the liturgy because we think that exclusivity will somehow engender mystery and awe.

But mystery is best known in the liturgy on the basis of the love of God freely given to everyone. And this mystery is not something that sort of floats around us like an atmosphere – here one minute and gone the next. Rather, the mystery of God's presence is among us as we open ourselves to the newness of God's presence with us. This is the surprising reality that God is present in this moment, in this place, freely entering into relationship with us, desiring to be known by us. Sacramental reality will always interrupt the carefully staged event of worship.

The sacraments expect that people's hearts are changed in worship. The liturgy is not just a place to seek comfort; it is a place in which we have the opportunity to turn from one way of being to a new way of being. In other words, liturgy is a place that calls people to repent. But it isn't the image of the street preacher ranting to the crowds to turn or burn that I want to lift up; it is the image of a welcoming God, one who rushes toward us with arms spread wide – not standing aloof from us. This is a quality of worship in which we can experience a change of heart.

The sacraments call us to metanoia – repentance – both old friends and strangers, children and adults, turning toward God. And this turning toward God is based not in the sense of our guilt, but in our desire to be remade. Sacramental reality welcomes the prepared as well as the unprepared to encounter the living God in the midst of the lively

people. The sacraments will make people powerful and wise and expand their vision of God, the world, and the self.

Another part of the conversion of life is found in our welcome of the stranger to stand equally with us in the liturgy. St. Gregory's begins its Sunday liturgy with this prayer, "Blessed be God the Word, who came to his own and his own received him not; for in this way God glorifies the stranger. O God, show us your image in all who come to us today that we may welcome them and you."

Welcome and hospitality are the ways in which we turn out from our selves to welcome those who come to worship with us bearing in their souls the image of God. Instead of wasting time judging whether or not someone is worthy to be in the assembly, and to participate fully in it, expect God to show up in the life of the stranger. It is in their experience that we can begin to find out more about what God is doing in the world. The liturgy is a tool of discipleship for us; it works to form both friends and strangers into the image of God. As we turn out from ourselves and toward those we don't yet know with real hospitality, we are learning about our own desire to be new, our own desire to understand more of God's creation and to experience more of God's presence in the liturgy.

The liturgy of the Episcopal Church relies on texts and practices that are understood by the assembly. Chiefly of these is (of course) the Book of Common Prayer, 1979. We must respect the texts and actions of worship, and understand that they cannot be preserved like an insect in amber. As a leader in the liturgy, you need to claim an improvisational approach to ritual practice. In the same way that people have to negotiate received tradition with emerging trends in their daily lives, worship negotiates old models and new ones. Language or ritual that no longer serves lived experience needs to be reorganized, revised or reinvented in order to be meaningful in the new circumstances being experienced by people who come to worship. New interpretations of tradition provide innovative means for addressing the needs experienced in life.

There is an obvious tension in this. For some, the traditional language and ritual action of liturgy contain personal meaning. It may not be the meaning that the original framers of the liturgy intended, but traditional language is powerful to many. Others are simply unmoved by the church's language of prayer. And most times both kinds of people are together in the same liturgy; at least I hope so. The liturgy must accept a worldview that is flexible enough to allow innovation, but resilient enough to address the present moment from the riches of our shared tradition.

This may feel like we are breaking rules. Liturgy, like faith, is risky. It is much easier to act for the sake of another's approval. Living into received expectations is simply a matter of making other people happy. Stepping out in faithful expectation that God will meet us along the way enlivens and terrifies. I believe that taking risks opens us to faith. Worship is an ongoing conversation in which liturgists, adults and children, the stranger who wanders in off the street and the Holy Spirit all participate. God is at work

in the ambiguity of human life, in trust and doubt, in our relationships and our loneliness, in the people we love and in strangers.

You don't have to claim that you are correct in what you're doing because "it's always been done this way before." You have options that can help to define an orthodox position. Real orthodoxy admits that it is completely dependent on God and God's presence with us as we gather to worship; it is experienced in the moment as the assembly gathers with their mismatched agendas and needs and longings and doubts. It is precisely in this mixing of the prepared and the unprepared, the saint and the sinner, that we see that God's love is universal; that God is not only the God of the religiously pure, but of all.

The sacraments are always tokens of love – God's love for the human family. Always remember that we touch each other in worship. I know that in some congregations this is a struggle. Sometimes a touch seems out of place or intrusive. But we touch each other in liturgy because touch is a natural human action that indicates affection. Affection implies an attitude toward the other that is nurturing, loving and careful. This attitude is the aperture through which we hope to see transcendence. You can create a sense of transcendence in all sorts of ways. One way is through fear, and sadly this has been a way that churches have tried to mediate transcendence. But, affection can be an entry to transcendence, in other words, the experience of God. Always remember that God desires us with a lover's passion; that God desires intimacy with us.

When we are affectionately related to one another and to God, we don't have time to be distracted by fear of the other. Affection is also crucial because it is the way in which human beings are so like God. God is passionately in love with us. This passion invades our understanding of ourselves and our relationships. The meeting place of human and divine passion is the place where we learn to value all of creation in a new way - in a way that shows the essential goodness of every created being. The meeting place of human and divine desire is also known by a name - Jesus.

In this affectionate context, we discover that beauty is at the heart of the sacraments. People's lives are enriched when they are welcome to come and worship in the beauty of holiness. In the beauty of the liturgy, a beauty that is completely popular, changing, and open to all people, we discover God – present and real, engaging us moment by moment. You will find beauty in the shared work of worship: when a child learns how to read the Epistle, when a musician composes a new hymn for us to sing, when a newcomer steps out of the crowd to serve communion.

Perhaps unexpectedly, beauty and justice are linked to each other. The same desire that pushes us toward beauty also pushes us toward the culture of God's justice. We realize this not from a position of superiority over the "less fortunate" but as God enlightens us to grow more and more into the divine image. This is a gift from God that we joyfully and humbly accept. The relationship between beauty and justice is often

overlooked in congregational life. I believe that each is dependent on the other. Beauty can strip away what is unreal in the liturgy so that we can see what is real, eternal and divine.

The sacraments are popular, in other words, they belong to the whole people of God. As the rector of a church, this insight has been a tremendously difficult and liberating thing for me. I was formed as a priest believing that I had certain privileges and responsibilities in the liturgy that nobody else could touch. Almost none of those were my canonical responsibilities; most were just the turf that I was taught to guard carefully. What I have found is that the core value of liturgical leadership – among the ordained and the non-ordained – is giving work away.

It is a good thing to see lots of people active in the service. When many people engage in leadership, the community recalls where its corporate identity and relationships are rooted: in the *leitourgos*, common work done for the sake of the whole. When we place a premium on giving work away, letting people do things not because they have to, but because they get to, people feel as if the work of the church is their own, because it is. Then the community has your back in the act of leading worship.

The sacraments tell us that worship is missional. We prepare the liturgy and perform it for the people who have not yet come through our doors. So we need to learn how to “pitch” the liturgy to the people who have never been present before. I know that a lot of liturgists and presiding clergy dislike doing this. I have heard them say that doing so “dumbs down” the liturgy or interrupts the flow of the service. I disagree. Leading the liturgy must take for granted that someone is going to be in the assembly who has never been in church before. In the same way that you wouldn’t expect a stranger in your home to know where to hang her coat, you can’t expect visitors to know how the liturgy works. Assuming that everyone who is in the service can figure out how the liturgy works introduces an insider orientation in the liturgy that clearly communicates that those who can find the page, or don’t understand what “intinction” means don’t deserve a place in the assembly.

One of the most important announcements we make is our invitation to communion. After the bread is taken, blessed and broken, the deacon says, “Jesus welcomes everyone to his table; so we offer the bread and wine which are Christ’s Body and Blood to everyone without exception.” Again, we take for granted that someone will be standing at the altar that has never been in church before. We want them to know what it is that we believe, as well as what we are about to do.

Ruth Meyers remarks that the communion invitation is our best opportunity to tell people what we believe they receive, and we should tell them plainly. Again, plain language is better than jargon for missional liturgy. We must simply state what is happening in the liturgy, even if what is happening is logically incomprehensible. How is wine blood? How is bread body? The point of saying in plain language what we are doing

is not to demystify the action of the liturgy; it is to say that the mystery present before us is greater than our own insider language.

The sacraments work to make strangers into a community. The plainspoken quality of the liturgy – speaking clearly in terms that can be understood, and avoiding jargon in favor of plain speech – encourages people to come closer into our communities. Membership is generously offered to everyone in order to see more of God’s work in our community. And we expect that God is seeking to be known to us in the lives of those we are only just getting to know. Every member of the community needs to accept responsibility for hospitality and welcome to strangers and visitors.

Here is a case study from St. Gregory’s, having to do with the collection of money; it is an important aspect of our welcome to visitors. We collect money after communion, placing the basket on the table and asking people to step up and leave their gifts. We explicitly ask first-time visitors NOT to put any money in the offering basket. That is our expectation of first-time visitors. But there is another expectation: we tell visitors we want them to come back and give money when they return. The actual script that we use is this: “Now seeing how greatly God loves us, let us share freely of the good things we have received. Bring your money right up to the table and put it in the basket. If this is your first visit, we ask you to wait. Notice the ways that God blesses you and then come back and make a thanksgiving gift when you return, for the whole church gives thanks for all the ways that God blesses you.”

We try to be clear that visitors do have an expectation; we do want them to come back. But first, we want them to pay attention to their lives, where they see God at work, how they see blessing opening them up to become more generous. In the same way that the liturgy is highly participatory, we expect that people will come to participate more fully in their own lives and the way they make choices about their own wealth.

The sacraments open us to the reality that God desires us all – friends and strangers alike. Since we believe that God desires us all, we can treat newcomers with as close to the same desire. We don’t have to “fix” other people; we get to live in relationships with them. Those relationships nurture the entire community’s strength. If we don’t require newcomers to know everything that we know, or act in a certain way, we can avoid the kind of resentment that comes when we think, “those people just don’t get it.” All of us tenured as well as new members are God’s beloved children who stand in assurance of God’s love. It’s this assurance of God’s love for all where we find the energy to serve others, just as Christ serves us all. We can trust that God is delighted to join in our celebration of the liturgy, and live with the presence of God in every moment of the liturgy.

There is a forward momentum to the liturgy. That is what life looks like: more than one thing happens at a time. Don’t give people an exemption from participating in the liturgy. Never use the phrase “if you’re comfortable” when it comes to participation. Do you really want people to be comfortable in the service? Do you want their lives to be

changed by God's engagement in the action of the service? Adults can make their choices about participation, and children too.

The sacraments say that what happens in worship is immediate. The celebration of the liturgy is generative not on the basis of manufacturing a certain feeling, but on the basis of giving ourselves over to the immediacy of the liturgy. Worship is more like a birthday dinner than it is like a trip to the theater. Don't expect people to willingly suspend their disbelief in the liturgy, or hold make-believe ideas about themselves or the world around them. Expect that something will happen in the liturgy, and help people to be present for that happening.

This does not mean that your job is to recreate the liturgy every Sunday. Tradition is essential. But, the way to appropriate the tradition of the church is essentially creative, not nostalgic. Nostalgia is a longing for memory of a resting place that was never real in the first place. Tradition is served when we creatively engage with what has come before us, instead of fetishizing and idolizing it. We consciously appropriate the tradition to serve the living ministry that God has given us here and now.

An example of this is our Ash Wednesday service. Four years ago we did a major reimagining of that service. We began with the litany of penance: ours had been quite long and specific. To my ear it started sounding very much like a laundry list of social offenses, a sort of public service announcement related to human sinfulness, unrelated to the way that many people experience themselves as sinners. The challenge was to make the act of penance real and personal, not abstract and generically specific. So I took a very traditional act of penance from the Byzantine church, of monastic origin, that is done at Sunday vespers the evening before Great Lent begins in the east. In essence it is an opportunity for each member of the assembly to greet every other member using this dialog: the first person says, "Forgive me a sinner." The other person says, "God forgives you, forgive me a sinner." And the first person says, "God forgives you." We roam around the church building, asking each other's forgiveness. It is incredibly powerful. And we adapt it to fit our particular understanding of the church.

One of the many goals of the liturgy is seeking the meeting place of divine and human desire. Begin with the assumption that God desires relationship with all people. Gregory of Nyssa said in his final writing, *The Life of Moses* that the goal of humanity is not to waste time worrying about rewards and punishments. Instead, he wrote, "The only thing truly worthwhile is becoming God's friend." It is friendship with God that we strive toward in our liturgy. We become closer to God in relation to each other in the assembly; anything that hinders that is worthless. It is in friendship with God that we are changed more and more into the image of God. Liturgy that engages people transforms their lives, and that is the point of liturgy.