

People's Work

by Donald Schell

In the church where I grew up, Sunday worship was a few hymns, a brief Bible reading, a long sermon and a long pastoral prayer. By age thirteen, I felt I was a spectator in a sea of spectators, desperately wishing we could sing more and pray out loud together. I loved the Lord's Prayer, but we didn't always say it. I wanted us to be a whole congregation sharing worship.

In college I visited Episcopal, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches and felt drawn in, though anxious that I wasn't sure how to cross myself or genuflect (and didn't know how to learn). But I felt alive and present to these strangers. Here everyone had a role and voice, gestures and movement; we were praying together and it made sense. Liturgy, they called it, from the Greek. It meant "people's work."

When I became an Episcopalian and went to seminary I knew I wanted to learn about liturgy. My last year of seminary, All Saints' Eve 1970, I went from New York to New Haven for a liturgy my friend Rick Fabian had designed for his student congregation at Yale. This All Saints' celebration had rich, accessible music, bright colors, real silences, and new texts from ancient models written in clear, lively English. I heard something like a voice within saying "This is it; this is what we're supposed to be doing." Oddly, I didn't feel it was me speaking, though I did feel included in the "we," and I felt included, rather than called or charged with doing something. Teresa of Avila used to call such little sentences "locutions." I came to believe that God was the speaker of the words I heard, and that "we" included God and all God's people, a lot more people than I will ever know, and what "we're supposed to be doing," became much bigger than that All Saints' Eve liturgy and bigger too than the wonderful liturgy we celebrate now at St. Gregory's.

God's "we" includes the week to week faithful everywhere, and visitors and strangers wherever "we" express and build relationship through what we do and how we share prayer.

What makes liturgy shared work? Literally, we sing, sit in silence, listen and speak, stand, move, embrace, eat, drink, and dance. In these actions, formalized or ritualized communications, we speak to one another and to God with our bodies and voices, and we "listen" not just with hearing but with all our senses. The real communication of the liturgy is not a statement, but moments it offers for moving (or being still) in open, loving relationship

together and with God.

Liturgy is not something we do for God, but our opportunity to touch and enlarge our experience of God, to be with God, to hear God, to know God; when it works, it changes who we are and how we live.

Jesus, our teacher, shared the prophet Micah's conviction that careful ritual sacrifice didn't interest God. Micah said what God wants is for us to "love justice and mercy and walk humbly with our God." What counts is not ritually perfect offerings, but human experience with God and just and loving human action.

The Gospel writers show Jesus creating a new liturgy for his new preaching. He replaced John's baptismal ritual with an eccentric sacred meal that welcomed unprepared sinners to feast with him. His meal practice lovingly mocked all foolish hopes of pleasing God by getting pure and ready or doing rituals just right. Jesus' liturgy opened people's eyes to see each other in new ways, and opened ears and hearts to God's vast, impatient longing for intimacy with us now.

Jesus' practice calls us back to basics: liturgy matters when it invites disciples and strangers into transforming experience. For all our work planning and executing liturgy at St. Gregory's, what matters is not liturgical quality, but what may happen in liturgy --people may find freedom to cry or laugh out loud and their hearts may be changed.

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I have just returned from two weeks of Spanish study in Morelia, Mexico. For two weeks I was a lost beginner in a world of speech I only sometimes understood and thoughts of my own I could rarely express. Every weeknight I attended Catholic mass in Spanish, the only obvious non-Mexican in a congregation of students, professionals, housewives and the poor, a hundred people in an old stone church.

The minimalist liturgy was quite unlike St. Gregory's. With the exception of a sermon and bit of singing, this liturgy had been designed to be as brief as possible. As a liturgy planner, I would have enjoyed something more spacious, less curt, but I wasn't there as a planner or a critic. I was a lonely stranger in need, living in a place and language that were foreign to me. This Mass was one event of my day when I felt at home. There was no silence and

no dancing, but the outline of the service was familiar to me from St. Gregory's as it could be familiar to any Episcopalian, Catholic, Lutheran, or Orthodox --gathering ritual and opening prayer, Bible readings, sermon, prayers, prayer over the bread and wine, the Peace, and communion.

Each night I joined strangers in a foreign country and an unfamiliar language doing the thing we do "back home." The familiar outline touched me because I knew where we were going and how to get there. Exchanging the Peace touched me especially when I felt touch and holy greeting from strangers. It erased distinctions between us and revealed a deeper unity than race, language, or culture. For a moment, it didn't matter that I was a non-Catholic foreigner. We were doing the work of liturgy, responding to the leader's invitation to find our human unity in God and feel God holding us as one.

I always did my best to sing with the congregation, though I found it hard not knowing the texts and had no words or music to read. They sang one "Alleluia" I knew and I joined in with gusto. I was relieved to discover that familiarity with Bible stories and passages allowed me, more or less, to understand the readings.

On the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, one of the priests moved me to tears with his sermon. Partly I understood his words -- Paul's conversion, he said, was more change of heart than change of mind; Paul's vision of Jesus on the Damascus road moved him to include a group he had once hated and feared in a new, larger vision of God's people. Jesus asserted relationship, forgiving Paul his acts as persecutor and giving him an unexpected new freedom.

I loved understanding the preacher's words, but even when I lost the thread and Spanish became suddenly incomprehensible to me, I loved his generous and inviting presence as a preacher. I was experiencing what he preached as he preached it.

When our Bishop, Bill Swing, was a parish priest in Washington D.C., he invited a researcher to interview new members of his growing congregation. He wanted to know why people came and why they stayed. Almost without exception new members reported that they had come seeking to experience God. Most also said they had not found the experience of God they were seeking but stayed because they found a loving community of people. The congregation pondered whether their new members were not recognizing what they actually found or whether the congregation needed to make a bolder invitation for people to experience God. Neither response feels quite satisfactory to me.

The sermon I heard in Mexico addresses the real opportunity and

challenge of those new people's hope. "We," God and the people making liturgy together, hope and intend to change our hearts. Doing that will give us one another, but the changed heart -- and the changed life we live with that heart -- is where and how we experience God.

Our liturgy does not offer God ritualized sacrifice to change God's mind about us. Action by action we invite everyone present to take part in some way -- with bodies and voices, thinking, imagination and memory. Together we create a gesture of ritual and words, a formed act of communication that works not by what it says, but by its repeated offer of moments to move or be still in relationship with one another and with God. As we make and respond to each small invitation to sing or speak, we move more and more into openness and responsiveness to invitation until we find ourselves ready to hear or feel God calling and inviting us. If after all the invitations of the worship leaders, God's quiet voice speaks to our practiced response, to our repeated willingness to take part, we hear God's longingly expressed request for our intimacy and friendship. This is the liturgy that will change our whole way of living.

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