

“Go in Peace. But Go!”

Robert Rimbo

Early in my episcopacy, I was having a dinner conversation with a number of bishops including then Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, George Anderson. It was a rough time for me, as it often is early in a first term. I had been struggling with a few congregations with a number of issues, principally that the ELCA was not their parents' church anymore. Anyway, while we were talking. Bishop Anderson summarized my feelings precisely: “Sometimes you just want to say, ‘Go in peace. But go!’”

This came to mind when the Institute of Liturgical Studies Advisory Council began working on the overall theme for the next three institutes, “Saying and Doing the Gospel Today: Mass, Ministry, Mission,” and particularly when my colleagues suggested that I might give this keynote address. My main point is this: We must start at the end, focus on mission throughout this three-year cycle, and that focus is especially important as we begin by thinking about the first subtitle, “Mass.”

Can we reclaim that word, Mass—and not just as a clever theme sponsored by 3-M—a word commonly used by the Lutheran Confessors to name the assembly gathered around word and sacrament? I know it's risky to a North American Lutheran bishop, especially one who is facing an election in two weeks, to say such a papist thing. But so be it. At the Notre Dame Pastoral Liturgy Institute a few years ago, when I suggested that Lutherans and Roman Catholics could commune at each others' tables since we agree on the doctrine of justification, some of my brother bishops in the Roman communion were interested in putting my head on a spike. So I suspect that when word of this proposal gets around, certain Super-Lutherans will want to do the same.

But “Mass” can also say other things, can't it? In its original use, it can refer to the sending, a rite focused on mission. “*Ite, missa est*” means much more than “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.” Literally, it says “Go, you are sent out.” It is the urgent call for us to get out of here but then return here, enhancing our assembly around word and sacrament by focusing on the mission of God. It is a cry to “Go in peace. But go!”—a hard word of admonition imperative for shy Lutherans. It is a word that, in fact, can

focus on another mass, the great mass of humanity, the great cosmic mass of creation in need of the gospel we are called to say and do. So, if you can stick with me in my cyclical way of thinking about the word “Mass” and about the mass of humanity and creation, we can start at the end of the liturgy, hearing God’s imperative invitation to “Go in Peace. But Go!”

I am reminded of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, specifically my favorite poem *Little Gidding*. You may already know that Little Gidding is a hamlet in Cambridgeshire, England, where a religious community was founded by Nicholas Ferrar in 1636. Ferrar was inspired both by the Catholic and Protestant teachings of his time and wanted to create a community where the best of both could be used in harmony. (Sounds appealing, no?) He also wanted a community in which married people with children could live alongside those called to celibacy, each feeding and balancing the other. And it worked, at least for a time. Although the community sought seclusion from the world, people were interested in the way of life they had established. And in 1936, three hundred years after its founding, Thomas Stearns Eliot was captivated by the place and wrote a poem inspired by his visits. I quote only a small portion:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from...

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

The end is where we start from. So let me try to say what my hopes are for these days at this institute, for this series on “Saying and Doing the Gospel Today,” and for our ongoing life as the assembly gathered around word and sacrament.

Mission to a Postmodern Society

Our mission to the world is, of course, also our mission to the church. My favorite Christian musical group, and believe me, they don’t have too much competition, is Lost and Found. My son converted me, and I happily

¹T. S. Eliot, “Little Giddings,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), 144–145.

promote these theologians, George and Michael, at every opportunity. One of their songs, entitled “Opener,” is a longing plea that we hear in our world and in our congregations:

I went to church on Sunday, just to hear good news
and I confess it's been years more or less
since I've warmed these pews.
But I'm looking for something stronger
than my own life these days,
but the church of my childhood seems like the YMCA ...

We just sing the songs we like to sing
and preach about the news
and think up some new things just to fill up the pews.
I want palms on Palm Sunday, I want Pentecost still to be red,
I want to drink of the wine and eat of the bread.
But they strive for attendance
while I starve for transcendence.²

How does the church minister to people in postmodern times who are starving for transcendence?

The term “postmodernism” is used in a wide variety of ways and covers a wide variety of ideas. In university history departments, postmodernism leads to revisionist accounts of events, a prime example of which is the amazingly successful book by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*—a masterpiece of revisionist history. One result of this kind of revisionism is an ever-increasing fracturing of society into various victim groups who are urged to tell their stories. People who accept postmodern theories claim that there is no meaning in texts or paintings or music except what the individual reader or viewer or listener brings to them. My concern is for how postmodern notions influence the people in our pews—or those absent from them.

Postmodernism was inevitable, since modernity believed so blindly and so firmly in the faulty Enlightenment notion of progress. With the rise of technology and science and economics and communications, the modern spirit insisted that every day in every way we were getting better and better—that we could solve the problems of the world with enough scientific discovery and technological fixes. Instead, the twentieth century gave us

²Lost And Found, “Opener,” *Sikkibahm*, Lost And Found And Limb Records, 1995; lyrics available at <http://www.speedwood.com/about/lyrics/opener.php> (accessed August 24, 2006).

disastrous world wars and depressions, the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, contemporary ethnic cleansing and tribalism, economic chaos in the face of massive global unemployment, the emptiness of entertainment that keeps dramatically escalating in violence and immorality, and the obvious loss of any moral consensus or commitment to the common good.

The failure of “progress” leads to postmodern spirals of despair and hopelessness. The poor outlook for jobs leaves young people without any reason to learn, even as their entertainments deprive them of the skills to do so. We might as well amuse ourselves to death, as Neil Postman’s book title suggests.³

Most important of all, the failure of the hyped-up promises of science and technology accentuates the loss of truth already inherent in modernist relativizing and in the rejection of authoritative structures or persons with moral authority. Consequently the major characteristic of the postmodern condition is the repudiation of any truth that claims to be truly true. In the April 6, 2004, issue of the *Detroit Free Press*, editorialist Susan Ager, wrote:

A Wisconsin college student, missing for four days, turns out to have faked her abduction.
Our government says things are getting better in Iraq at the same time the evening news shows things getting worse.
On the brink of April 15, millions of us are fudging our church contributions and exaggerating the value of clothes we donated to Goodwill....
Lies R Us....
Lies R Us and we’re an enterprising people. We’ve come up with a thousand ways to justify them.⁴

“Christianity might be true for you, but it’s not for me,” our children used to say with modernist relativity. But now they are learning that any claim to truth is merely a means to hide an oppressive will to power. The result is the malaise of meaninglessness, the inability to trust anyone, and the loss of any reference point by which to construct one’s life. To this meaningless postmodern mass we for whom the Mass is central have much to offer.

³Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

⁴Susan Ager, “Truth Erodes, Even among Vegetables,” *Detroit Free Press*, 6 April 2004.

For the sake of this mission, our first efforts have focused on providing new styles, new idioms for our worship, and sometimes, new orders. In response to the downward trends in worship attendance that accompanied the massive changes in United States society since the 1960s, many congregations took drastic turns without adequate thinking about theological and ecclesiological implications. Without sounding too ticked off, I'd like to tick off some of the moves that are questionable.

In the face of relativizing truth, some dispensed less truth instead of more, becoming therapeutic instead of theological, with the proliferation of entertainment. Some sacrificed content for form. Some confused worship with evangelism and evangelism with marketing. As society became more openly pluralistic and less supportive of Christianity in particular, some congregations blurred their unique identity as the people of God, instead of accentuating it with loving commitment. As the culture became more and more rootless, some denominations and individual parishes gave up their heritage as communities with long histories and global connections. In response to the increasing clamor for choice, some congregations fostered consumerism according to "felt needs" instead of embracing what is truly needed. In short, rather than Mass we had a mess.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not advocating a wooden traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan's distinction is forever apt: traditionalism is the dead faith of the living, whereas tradition is the living faith of the dead. Many of us come to this institute year after year because it offers an escape from the polarities of the so-called "worship wars" between contemporary and traditional. It offers the best from both—or rather, all—sides, since the church's house is filled with treasures old and new. As God's people beyond the limits of space and time we are linked not only to all God's people in the past, but also to all those yet to come, so we need both continuity with our heritage and constant reformation. And that has been at the center of the ILS Advisory Council's planning.

So, please know that I am interested in evangelism. I want us to reach that great mass of humanity searching for transcendence. I am, also, really worried about some misconceptions that continue to thrive and an alarming lack of clarity as to what the evangel is. People are still being told we should have at least two "points of entry" into our congregations—at least two kinds of worship styles to attract seekers, even though there has been no significant numerical growth in those congregations that offer contemporary and traditional services. The fatal flaw in that kind of thinking is twofold: 1) Worship is not the point of entry, you are; and 2) we

are all seekers. Nowhere does the Bible say to worship God in order to attract unbelievers. Nowhere. We worship God because God is worth it, God is worthy of our praise, a central truth brought home most beautifully in Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright's book.⁵

The scriptures do say that we are all witnesses, however. Evangelical outreach happens in our daily lives, our regular encounters, our simple conversations and caring, or at evangelistic events that have a focus different from worship, in order that we can bring others to worship God. But let me be clear: Evangelism is the means. Worship is the end.

Another misconception frequently touted is that worship should be user-friendly. Believe me, I get into a lot of worshipping communities where the service folders are absolutely worthless. So, I am certainly not advocating worship that alienates or is totally inaccessible. But scripture helps us see that being confronted by God is not always comfortable or comforting. God is not easily understandable, nor is it cozy to be a disciple. Annie Dillard paints this picture in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

I have been attending Catholic Mass for only a year. Before that, the handiest church was Congregational.... Week after week I was moved by the pitiableness of the bare linoleum-floored sacristy [i.e., chancel] which no flowers could cheer or soften, by the terrible singing I so loved, by the fatigued Bible readings, the lagging emptiness and dilution of the liturgy, the horrifying vacuity of the sermon, and by the fog of dreary senselessness pervading the whole ...⁶

Dillard reports that the Catholic church proved more innovative. Describing the assembly singing a new version of the Sanctus, she reports, "I would rather, I think, undergo the famous dark night of the soul than encounter in church the dread hootenanny."⁷ On another occasion, parishioners participated in the sacred supper accompanied by piano renditions from *The Sound of Music*. She continues:

A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is

⁵N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997).

⁶Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 27.

⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens.⁸

We must be careful not to offend other seekers, but we must also remember that Christ is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

Defining Worship

We need to answer a basic question: What is worship? At times it is clear that not everyone knows. So let me try some thoughts. Worship is the language of adoration addressed to God and the language of God equipping us for life and witness. Good worship will be evangelistic, but that is not its purpose, for worship is directed to God as its subject and object. Good worship will both nurture the character of believers and the community, and also form us to be the kind of people who will reach out in witness and service to the world.

Worship is ritual, not entertainment. It does not always have to be different, filled with new and exciting ways of doing things. Liturgy is meant to “form” us, not to have us on the edge of our seats. Worship keeps bringing us back to the old words until we begin to know them by heart, and to the old signs until we begin to see and feel what they mean. Our care should be to let the words be heard, to let the images shine, to let the gestures be done clearly so that they speak for themselves.

Worship is prayer. It involves prayerful togetherness, prayerful hearing of the word, prayerful concern for the world, prayerful acknowledgment of the gifts of God, and prayerful acceptance of God’s commission to go and serve God in our lives. The place where the community gathers, wherever that may be, is not a classroom or a dance hall or a theater or a cafeteria or a private chapel; it is a house of common prayer for the people of God.

Worship is not so much a celebration of life as we know it, as it is a celebration of the life we hardly expect. While it uses the stuff of everyday life—water, words, table, song, movement, meeting, touching, chairs, flowers—it uses them all with a sense of the holiness of these things, a holiness derived not so much from their presence in a sacred place as from a recognition of the sacred presence which pervades all places. The people and language and things of our worship are to be handled with reverence and care.

⁸Ibid., 20.

Worship is service. The German word for worship, *Gottesdienst*, is a wonderfully ambiguous term referring to our service of God, God's service of us, and the service we and God offer the world. Go in peace. Go. Serve.

Our worship needs the truth—the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help us, God. The truth that the church has to offer to people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness. To those who criticize Christianity because it has been (and sometimes is) violent and oppressive, we must respond with the acknowledgment that they are right. But beyond accepting the blame for Christians' failures in history, we must recognize the whole truth that we remain sinful and fallible. The scriptures teach us thoroughly that our nature is helplessly sinful, hopelessly lost. That truth forces us to see that we cannot know the truth entirely, that our eyes are blinded, that our understanding of God is only partial. But that does not negate the truth of God nor our recognition of Christ as the truth, the life, and the way.

Against the postmodern rejection of the possibility that there is any universal, overarching truth true to all people in all places, Christianity can humbly suggest a non-oppressive, all-inclusive story of a triune God who creates, redeems, and unifies as manifestations of a perfect love for the whole world. We believe in a promising God who always keeps those promises—a truth clearly seen in the First Testament history of Israel and in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again in fulfillment of God's promises. We believe that the metanarrative of these scriptures will reach its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus comes again to bring God's promised gracious reign to fruition—and thus the metanarrative of God's reign already initiated gives us all that we most deeply need of hope, purpose, and fulfillment in this present life.

This God of eternal mystery condescends and is revealed to us—a process which invites us to worship. That is why our worship needs to be structured as richly and deeply and truly as possible, so that we never lose sight of the fact that God is the one who enables us to come to worship, and God is the one who receives our praise.

Our worship must contain nothing but the truth. Music, songs, scripture, preaching, forms, architecture, art, gesture, and ambience are all means by which God invites, reveals, and forms us. If we use shallow—and please note, I did not say simple—but shallow worship materials (and here I think of a definition of praise songs: one thought, two words, three hours), such shallow materials will not reveal the truth about God. Instead, they will shape shallow theology and form us superficially. Songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or music belie the coherence and integrity of God.

Sermons that draw attention to the preacher's eloquence or are merely a book review for the newest material from Saddleback Church or speak merely to the superficial wants of consumers deprive the congregation of the formative power of the scriptural narratives for meeting our genuine needs for repentant insight, constant forgiveness, authentic security, unconditional love, absolute healing, faithful presence, fruitful freedom, compelling motivation, coherent guidance for daily life, and eternal hope.

Worship can never give us the whole truth all at once, but it dare never give us untruth or less-than-truth. Our finite minds cannot begin to grasp all that there is to learn about God, but every time the community gathers we have the opportunity to add to our total store of truth. Only by God's grace and in the context of prayer and the Christian community can worship leaders prepare services that present as much truth as possible. Against postmodernity's rejection of the past and of authority, in the church we realize we are greatly helped by the wisdom gathered throughout the church's existence, by history's sorting of the good from the less-than-good in hymns and liturgies and interpretations. Now it is our responsibility to sort through the mass of what is new in order to choose what is true to the Mass—keeping God as the subject/object of our worship, nurturing the truthful character of individual believers, and forming the Christian community to be reaching out with the truth we know.

The world that surrounds us yearns for stability, morality, security, transcendence, faith, hope, and love. These deep needs can only be met through the One who meets our deepest needs for truth.

Intentional Congregations

One of my hopes as a bishop of the church is the revitalization of congregations. The November/December 2002 issue of the Alban Institute's monthly magazine, *Congregations*, makes the case for what writer Diana Butler Bass calls "intentional congregations." I would offer the possibility that we might call them confessional and contextual congregations, which sounds very Lutheran to my ears. I urge you to look up this article and ponder it in its fullness, but I will attempt to do justice to it to whet your appetites.

These days folks in leadership throughout the church know the story of what Dr. Bass names "St. What-A-Surprise," a particularly vital, healthy, and growing congregation. I hear this kind of story all the time from folks all over the church. What fosters this vitality? Dr. Bass groups such congregations into four categories: The evangelical style, along the lines of

Dean Kelley's 1972 book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*; the "new paradigm" style which attempts to imitate Willow Creek Community Church; as well as the "diagnostic style," which borrows from psychological therapy and the social sciences. I'll get to the fourth style in a moment.⁹

The track record and potential of each of these three styles is clearly successful in terms of numerical growth. But Dr. Bass finds enough *exceptions* to question how universal they might actually be. For example, she says there are enough vital, thriving congregations (St. What-A-Surprise) that are theologically liberal to suggest that a switch to a more conservative theology is not required. And there are enough vital, thriving congregations that feature traditional liturgies and worship spaces to prove that not all churchgoers are after a "symbolically neutral" worship service. And, finally, Dr. Bass notes, there are enough thoughtful, theologically mature congregational leaders with a sense of identity and vision at *both* declining *and* thriving congregations to confirm that there's more to vitality than organization and leadership. So what's left?

Mainline observers—among them, I fear, certain leaders in the Lutheran community—have largely overlooked a fourth possibility, the emergence of what Dr. Bass calls the intentional congregation. I think these congregations bear the marks of Lutheranism, marks which we dare not lose. These congregations form no national movement and claim no single source of inspiration. They have no party, no platform, no seminary, no publication, no organization. Each is a unique and inventive blend of local vision (what I would call context), denominational identity (what I would call confessional integrity), and Christian practice (what I would call liturgy, among other things like catechesis, serious devotion to the scriptures, striving for justice, etc.). Such congregations exist. I know. Over the years I have been a member of a few of them. Dr. Bass writes,

Intentional congregations are neither "conservative" nor "liberal." They are not seeker-oriented, but seekers are attracted by their spiritual practices. Like any other human community, they have their share of conflict and dysfunction. These churches resist labeling, serve no identifiable theological "party," and reject programmatic fixes. Here's how I would define them:

In these congregations, transmission of identity, tradition, and practice occurs not by birth, and thus it is not assumed; rather, transmission occurs through choice and through reflective engagement, as a process both individual and communal. These

⁹Diana Butler Bass, "A Tale of Two Churches," *Congregations* (November/December 2002): 21–22..

churches tend to be theologically moderate-to-liberal and are reinvigorating historic practices based upon ancient Christian tradition; they might also be called “neo-traditional” because they reach back so as to move forward. In these congregations, people choose to embrace or recreate practices drawn from the long Christian tradition—practices that bind them together and connect them with older patterns of living as meaningful ways to relate to a post-Christian society.¹⁰

Striking a Balance

While I have spoken about my hope for “intentional congregations,” I want also to speak of the need for balance and discernment in worship planning. Among my hopes for all of us engaged in leading worship is that we care for language, verbal and visual. Among many things this means being attentive to how we speak of the God who is beyond gender and how we speak as the people of God who are radically inclusive. At the same time, our faithfulness to tradition and our caring for literary art would cause us to dismiss poetic treasures, even with what might be called sexist language, only with great and careful discernment. Some of the linguistic tampering which we who were involved in the production of *Lutheran Book of Worship* did is, shall we say, a worthy effort but less than satisfying.

We need also to be aware of the amazing impact of the visual in our culture. I would caution us to great and careful discernment in this arena as well, that our efforts not be construed as cheesy or manipulative. There are herds of golden calves awaiting our worship. But I will leave it to my colleague, Eileen Crowley, to help us all consider this more.

So, also, our gestures. I am convinced that those who are to preside at the liturgy, for example, should learn from dancers and actors. Two of the most formative books I have read are Gabe Huck’s still-relevant and helpful *Liturgy with Style and Grace*, the title of which succinctly states my continuing hope, and, William Seth Adams’s *Shaped by Images*, which has helped me think and visualize more clearly about presiding at worship.

I want also to express my hope that we reach a balance that offers revived communities and respects individuals simultaneously. In the face of American rugged individualism, we need the reminder that worship is about something other than confirming us in our individual ways. Worship shapes a common life, a life with others. It places individuals in community, and the people I talk to sense a deep need for that very gift.

Such worship will also prevent us from nationalistic impulses, ideological movements, and utopian programs that seek to shape human

¹⁰Ibid., 22.

communities and command the allegiance of individuals. The kind of community to which the church is committed is not determined by territory, ideology, or fantasy. It is a place where each individual stands equally before God's judgment and mercy and where the well-being of the least dare not be ignored. As Thomas Schattauer writes,

The communal character of the liturgical assembly is a critical aspect of the mission of God in contemporary circumstances. On the one hand, it critiques every notion of the autonomous individual and affirms the fundamentally social nature of human existence. On the other hand, it critiques every form of human community that disregards the dignity and well-being of the individual, including the structures and practices of churchly life itself. This critique takes place because the church, constituted in its liturgical assembly, is a distinctive community amid the plurality of communities, the one community that refers us ultimately to the fellowship that God establishes and promises to be the destiny of human existence.¹¹

A Mass for the Masses

I recently purchased an amazing book on the basis of the catalog's blurb about it and its captivating title: *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God*. I've read it twice. As the title suggests, it is a richly laden table of insights following in the tradition of such thinkers as Virgil Michel, Dorothy Day and Monika Hellwig. The book's central theme is the often ignored connection between the Mass and justice, the connection between re-membering ourselves to Christ in the Mass and re-membering ourselves to the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the executed, the forgotten. McCormick writes,

the Eucharist is a feast of remembrance, an *anamnesis* that opens us up to the dangerous memories of a Christ who stands with, embraces, and becomes one of the poor—who takes on the mortal and frail flesh of the hungry, sick, naked, homeless, dispossessed, and disappeared. In the Eucharist we are called to remember all the blessings we have received from God and all the ways in which neighbors, strangers, even enemies—indeed all other creatures—are part of this blessing. We are also called to remember all the ties and duties that bind us to others. Injustice begins with forgetting, with forgetting the faces and cries of the poor. In the Eucharist we are

¹¹Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 16.

called to re-member ourselves to those we have forgotten, for we cannot remember Christ and forget the poor.¹²

In this astonishing book McCormick uses four metaphors Christians have traditionally used to speak of the Mass: bread, table, body, and sacrifice. He explores these in such a way that our attention moves from our own participation in the Mass to focus on the great mass of humanity whom Jesus instructed us to invite to our banquets, and reminds us that as Christ's living body we are to stand with and care for all the world's nobodies. I anticipate that as we focus more sharply on Ministry and Mission in the coming years of this series, we will be enriched by McCormick's insights.

A Form That Is Formative

Since I am to speak specifically about the Mass in relationship with ministry and mission, let me turn now, briefly, to some words about the *ordo*, the form that is formative.

Gathering

The first, most basic sign of God's redemptive intervention in human life is the very existence of the assembly itself. Think about it. The reason we gather for worship on Sunday is that God has called us together. It is our vocation, our calling. The Sunday assembly, lukewarm and listless, confused and prejudiced though it might be, is nevertheless the people of God. This assembly is the sign set among the nations to testify to the reality of God and to God's concern for the human race. Of course, it might not be a very good sign of God's salvation. It can be riddled with cliques, smug and self-satisfied, lacking any sense of itself as a Christian community, rife with prejudice and soiled with injustice, its life shaped by the ways of the world and not by the ways of God. But it is still a sign of God's gracious love, the body of Christ in the world God loves. So the gathering is itself a sign of what God is doing and promises to do: to gather all people into one; to overcome divisions; to provide a place for the homeless and the lonely; to give support to those whose burdens are heavy; and to create an oasis of community in the midst of a world painfully divided and individualized. This mass of believers at Mass is the anticipation of the day when God's reign will be established in all its fullness. Then there will be no more discrimination, no more hunger or thirst, no more mistrust and violence, no

¹²Patrick T. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004), xi.

more competitiveness and abuse of power, for all things will be subject to Christ, and God will reign over all in peace and forever.

Word

The liturgy of the word is not instruction *about* God. It is the Word of God addressed to us *by* God. That's different from religious instruction—and a lot of folks have not yet learned that difference, so it cries out for care. The liturgy of the word is not talking about God; it is God speaking to us. And God communicates not merely by putting thoughts into our heads or whispering in our ears, but by doing significant things in human lives.

The scriptures are the written memory of the people of God, the record of and reflection on the acts of God in the past. But of what use is that to us? Why should we remember the past? Why do we keep on telling these old stories? Has God stopped working? Has God no more to say? Are there no longer any significant events? Of course God still acts and still speaks, but how do we recognize God?

God speaks in events and circumstances of our lives and times, but in order to interpret our lives in the present we must know what has happened in the past. The remembrance of the past is the key to understanding the present. We read the scriptures because they are the memory of God's people; they are not read simply for their own sakes, as people who keep rehearsing their memories and living in the past. The scriptures are read as the formative memory which makes the present intelligible, helping us understand our own lives and interpret the significant events in our world today as "word of God" events in which God is continuing to be active and present. That is why we read the scriptures and preach the scriptures.

Meal

Here the four-fold pattern of gathering, word, meal, and sending is met by another four-fold pattern central to the Mass. "Do this in remembrance of me." Do what? What did Jesus do that we are now to do in memory of him? What's the formative pattern? Not "What Would Jesus Do?" but "What Did Jesus Do?"

From all accounts he was celebrating a meal, a ritual meal into which he inserted new meaning of his own so that it became a celebration of what God was accomplishing in Jesus. When he came to table with his disciples Jesus took bread, blessed God, broke the bread, and distributed it to them, saying "This is my body, given for you." And then he took a cup of wine. Again, he gave thanks to God, shared the cup with his disciples, and said,

“Drink; this is the cup of my blood shed for you.” So here is a four-fold pattern within a four-fold pattern: the taking of the bread and the cup; the thanksgiving to bless God; the breaking of the bread; and the sharing of the bread and the cup.

This is what Jesus did and told us to do in memory. And in this way, the memory of the Lord is preserved as something living and vital. This four-part pattern of the meal continues in the liturgy today when it is celebrated with respect for the integrity of the rite.

We need to restore some significance to that first action of giving gifts and preparing the table. For centuries, Christians brought bread and wine, corn and oil and eggs and cheese and spare clothing—whatever they had—to the table. The offering was a time for redistributing the wealth of the community, so that no one grew fat while another starved, and no one kept coats in the closet while others shivered in the cold. They could not celebrate the memory of Jesus’ gift of himself without themselves being generous with one another. Some bread and wine were selected from the gifts that had been brought, and this select portion was placed on the table. The remainder of the gifts were taken out and distributed to the needy at the conclusion as the liturgy continued in the world. I believe this *also* was part of the early Christians’ response to Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me.” To remember Christ was not just to think about him: it was to live as he lived and to love as he loved in very practical ways. As stated previously, the Mass is marked by remembering the needs of the whole world.

Having taken these elements, Jesus said a blessing in keeping with Jewish prayer forms. He did *not* bless the bread and wine in some sort of consecratory hocus-pocus; he blessed *God the Father over* the bread and wine, a prayer of praise recognizing the presence and action of God in all the events of life. The Great Thanksgiving, then, is the fulfillment of one part of Jesus’ command to do this in memory of him; it is the blessing and praise of God the Father in memory of Jesus.

The eucharistic prayer makes clear the character of the whole celebration as a celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection. It is an act of remembering before God the sacrifice of Jesus who, in submission to his Father and for love of us all, did not try to evade death, but let himself be crucified and killed. Remembering the death of Jesus is not something that can be done simply by thinking about it. Remembering Jesus dying and rising means living as he lived, thinking as he thought, acting as he acted. To remember the death of Jesus is not just to be moved to tears by old

memories, but to heed the words of St. Paul: “have the same mind in you which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:3).

The purpose of the Mass is not to give lip service to God but to glorify God as Jesus glorified God. We do this by transforming our lives under the influence of the Spirit of God so that we become increasingly Christ-like in our devotion to God and to the welfare of others. Jesus glorified his Father before all by being totally given over to the Father’s work in the world, no matter what the cost to Jesus himself. We celebrate the memory of Jesus by offering our own lives for the life of the world. The celebration of the Mass is inseparable from our continuing conversion to a deeper life with God and to a profounder life of obedience and service.

The breaking of the bread is of such importance in the history of liturgy that it is identified as one of the marks of the Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles. This is basically a functional gesture: for a loaf to be shared among several people it had to be broken. But the fact that there was only one loaf to be divided among all those present struck Christians as being significant from the beginning. St. Paul put it well in writing to the Corinthians: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). The early Christians saw the Eucharist as a sign of the new community God was establishing through the dying-rising Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a community that embraced man and woman, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and ignored all the old historical enmities and all the accepted social and economic barriers between people.

The breaking of the bread holds a profound truth; it is a sign of the unity given us in Christ, a unity which triumphs over all human differences, prejudices and inequalities. The breaking of bread is a sign of the irrelevance of our divisions and classes; in fact, the Eucharist *makes* these divisions irrelevant. But we have to take that seriously in our own lives, which means living *as if* there were no classes, no racial differences, no social or economic barriers between people. It means dropping our grudges and our suspicions and our prejudices. Put another way: Jesus did not leave us a sacramental theology; he left us the pattern of things to say and do, and in this saying and doing we discover what he meant, we discover that we are called to share in the likeness of his dying and rising.

The fourth thing Jesus did was distribute the bread and wine to his disciples, telling them to take it, to eat, and to drink. The Holy Communion is the sign of the common life we share in Christ, the sign of God’s gracious love. So St. Augustine comments that when the presiding minister says,

“The body of Christ,” and we say, “Amen,” we are saying “Amen” to what we are, the body of Christ.

We have to find ways of celebrating the Mass that help people realize they are communicating with one another in Christ rather than merely engaging in a me-and-Jesus blessing of American rugged individualism. To receive a piece of a single loaf of bread instead of a little individual wafer is one way. To drink from a common cup rather than those silly shot glasses is another. But we would also benefit from doing something with the communion procession that sets it apart from standing in line at K-Mart, where I am always in the wrong lane. Can we involve servers and processional torches in such a way that the communion procession *becomes* a procession? Can we mark this action by encouraging people to sing on the way to and from the communion, urging them to carry their books with them or using songs that are known by heart? Can we do away with those little mini-table blessings after each group of eight or twelve is done receiving? (In fact, I wonder about the table blessing which concludes the entire communion rite itself; it seems that we have three dismissals: table blessing, big blessing, and final sending. How many do we need?) Which brings me back to the larger pattern and to the part of the liturgy called sending, the end which is the beginning.

Sending

John F. Hoffmeyer, assistant professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, wrote a stunning article entitled “The Missional Trinity” for the journal *dialog*, in which he focuses on the *Missio Dei* in the life of the Church. I want to quote it at some length because he speaks so eloquently of our call to go in peace:

The question might well arise: Does n’t the church’s liturgy encourage us to think of the church as “inside” and the world as “outside”? We gather for worship, are renewed by the Word in scripture, sermon, and sacrament, and then are sent in mission. Isn’t our gathering a “coming out” of the world, even as the name *ek-klesia* denotes those who have been “called out”? Isn’t the sending at the close of our liturgy precisely a sending “back into” the world, so that we can there carry out our mission as church?

The rhythmic movement of gathering in and being sent out is certainly embedded in our liturgy. But that rhythm has a complex structure that it must retain in order to be true to its source in the gospel. First, our gathering has a specific center. We gather around the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Christ, though, is a very odd center. Christ is a center who is on the outside. One of the facts about Jesus that most consistently infuriated his seriously religious neighbors was that he insisted on hanging around with people on the “outside”: tax collectors, various categories of

women of low reputation, “sinners.” As a victim of crucifixion, the most politically-charged form of the death penalty in his time and place, Jesus was most decidedly on the outside: outside the city, outside the law, outside the bounds of public honor and respect. In the famous parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus explicitly promises that he is to be found in those “on the outside” of society: the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned. Jesus’ presence in the outside is invisible, so the “sheep” in the story don’t even know that it is Jesus whom they are feeding, visiting, etc.

Likewise, our liturgy’s “sending” is simultaneously a gathering. When we gather at the communion table we hear that we are participating in a “foretaste of the feast to come.” We are anticipating the eschatological banquet in which all will have a place. This means, though, that in gathering apart as the church to eat the Eucharistic meal, we threaten to contradict the very content of the meal as anticipation of the eschatological banquet. We threaten to become the church gathering to eat a meal separate from the rest of the world that “God so loved.” We avert that threatened betrayal of the sense of the meal as long as our churchly Eucharist functions as a symbol of the eschatological banquet. But our gathering at the Lord’s table functions as such a symbol only as long as the gathering is open toward all the world. We enact that openness precisely as we go from our worship gatherings to share communion with the sick and homebound, to invite others to the next celebration of the Eucharist, to fill grocery bags in food pantries, to advocate for legislation that will reduce the number of hungry people, to refuse to cross picket lines where workers are striking to be able to feed their families, etc. These actions, too, anticipate the day when all of us in God’s world will sit down around God’s table. These actions—the actions that we are “sent” to do as mission—are part of the Spirit’s eschatological “in-gathering” for God’s great banquet.

In these specific ways—and not by virtue of a vague affection for paradox—our gathering as church is a sending and our sending is a gathering. To neglect our missional sending as church is not just to be weak on mission while possibly still being strong on word and sacrament. To neglect our missional sending is to betray the inherent dynamic of word and sacrament.¹³

In closing, I beg that our worship be centered on God in ritual, prayer, holy expectation, and multi-layered service; that our worship contain and convey the truth; that our worship form us in the image of Christ and help us toward Christian maturity; that our congregations be restored to communities that confess the faith in their current contexts, never forsaking the Gospel of Jesus crucified and risen as we say and do that gospel; that we care for our various languages about God and about ourselves, while not forsaking the beauty of our inheritance; that in the face of social patterns to the contrary, we commit ourselves to being communities in Christ which rejoice in the company of each individual; that nurtured at the Mass, we do

¹³John F. Hoffmeyer, “The Missional Trinity,” *dialog* 40/2 (Summer 2001): 109–110.

justice. I beg that the vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's statement on the practice of word and sacraments, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, be lived in our parishes for the life of the world:

Baptism and baptismal catechesis join the baptized to the mission of Christ. Confession and absolution continually reconcile the baptized to the mission of Christ. Assembly itself, when that assembly is an open invitation to all peoples to gather around the truth and presence of Jesus Christ, is a witness to the world. The regular proclamation of both Law and Gospel, in Scripture reading and preaching, tells the truth about life and death in all the world, calls us to faith in the life-giving God, and equips the believers for witness and service. Intercessory prayer makes mention of the needs of all the world and of all the church in mission. When a collection is received, it is intended for the support of mission and for the concrete needs of our neighbors who are sick, hurt, and hungry. The holy Supper both feeds us with the body and blood of the Christ and awakens our care for the hungry ones of the earth. The dismissal from the service sends us in thanksgiving from what we have seen in God's holy gifts to service in God's beloved world.

In the teaching and practice of congregations, the missional intention for the means of grace needs to be recalled. By God's gift, the Word and the sacraments are set in the midst of the world, for the life of the world.¹⁴

Indeed,

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from...

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁵

¹⁴Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 56:51A–51B.

¹⁵T. S. Eliot, "Little Giddings," in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950*, 144–145.