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MARY CLARE TIEDE HOTTINGER

# The Power of Ritual Action and George Floyd Square

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by the Minneapolis police on the corner of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue. As Mr. Floyd was murdered on camera for the world to see, we were all reminded of the deep evil that is white supremacy. This evil remains alive and well in our systems today, built in to allow systemic violence to continuously operate as the status quo. But the world did not respond to this act of violence with passivity or indifference. People came together, in large numbers, to form communities united in the vision of a more just world. Witnessing the formation of these communities, and the spaces they created, reminded us of the power generated through collective action. In the days following the murder of George Floyd, the intersection of 38th and Chicago transformed into a central meeting spot for community members who gathered to grieve, memorialize, and share space with one another. There was a collective sense that this ground was now sacred, and this fight for life and justice a sacred fight. Despite the acts and efforts of law enforcement and politicians, the corner of 38th and Chicago, memorialized as George Floyd Square, remains separated from the rest of Chicago Avenue, made distinct by the use of blockades that restrict motor traffic or external disturbance. George Floyd Square became and remains sacred space because of the community that believes in a better world in such a deep and real way that they have no choice but to stand

together to work and construct a space in which that vision of the world could be possible.

Community is power, something I believe in the heart of my being. Still, we can lose sight of this power; when the grievances of the world and the rigid structures of our systems feel too strong we are discouraged by the lack of progress we may see and exhausted by what can feel like a never-ending battle against injustice. This is precisely why we cannot stand alone in the grief or trauma perpetrated against ourselves or our siblings in the world, left to our own spiral of despair. In community we are able to find connection and purpose. But how does this sense of unity become established in the face of cultural violence and destruction? Further, how does it move forward in ways so as to make new spaces that could be examples of an alternative vision for the world? One of the most powerful ways that we can join together in community and form deep intentional connections is through ritual action. George Floyd Square is an example of a place established as sacred (and set apart from the rest of the world), in which ritual action sometimes takes place as a way to envision and enact a vision of a better world. For example, the Square's physical uses are many:



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there are multiple clothing donation and pick-up locations, free groceries and book centers, a community garden, and a resource hub, just to name a few. Here, the community began gathering in acknowledgment of sacred space, and grew unified through ritual actions such as memorialization through art, protests for justice, or offering their siblings in humanity care, whether medical, spiritual, or simply loving.

What can we learn from George Floyd Square by examining the roles of sacred space and ritual action in forming and maintaining an active and ignited community? Ritual action and sacred space are two interconnected concepts that have played an important role in many religious and cultural traditions throughout history. Ritual is an act, or a series of repeated acts, that are set apart from others which work to represent and embody a set beliefs.<sup>1</sup> These actions may include prayer, meditation, chanting, dancing, or other forms of intentional repeated actions. Ritual can create a sense of community and belonging, as well as can inspire liberation. Ritual can also be utilized as a tool of control when used by a dominant power force to establish or maintain social control. Ritual is often practiced in particular locations that are often set apart from the rest of the world. This is often thought of as sacred space. Sacred space refers to a location or environment that is imbued with spiritual/cultural significance or power.<sup>2</sup> Sacred spaces can vary widely in look and environment, from something in a natural setting such as a mountaintop or a forest to human-made structures such as temples, shrines, or mosques. The creation and maintenance of sacred space often involves ritual actions such as purification, consecration, and offering; however, this relationship between ritual action and sacred space is not entirely unidirectional but often reciprocal, with each reinforcing and enhancing the other. For example, a sacred space may be created through the performance of ritual actions, and in turn, the presence of a sacred space may facilitate deeper and more meaningful ritual experiences. Additionally, the use of ritual actions within sacred space may serve to enhance the power and efficacy of those actions. Through these practices, individuals and communities can tap into a sense of transcendence and meaning that goes beyond the mundane aspects of daily life, and connect with something greater than themselves. This

sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself can often connect us to a greater community beyond what we may have thought ourselves to be a part of.

This being said, it is fair to say that one of the most powerful functions of rituals is their ability to create a sense of belonging and community. When people come together to participate in a ritual, they are united by a common purpose and experience. This shared experience can create a sense of connection and belonging that extends beyond the boundaries of the ritual itself and can become the foundation for a community to be effective in enacting real, deep change.

George Floyd Square in Minneapolis is a prime example of a sacred space in which ritual action occurs to enact social change. The square has been transformed into a sacred space through the use of ritual actions, including the laying of flowers, the lighting of candles, and the holding of vigils and protests. The site has become a place of pilgrimage for those seeking to honor and mourn Floyd's life, and engage in community movements for social justice. The square has also become a hub for cultural and political events, such as art installations, performances, and speeches. These events serve to strengthen the bonds of the community and empower people to take action. In this way, the square has become a space for transformation, where people can come together to grieve, heal, and work towards a better future. In these ways, George Floyd square in Minneapolis exemplifies the power of ritual action. Through the use of rituals, the square marks sacred space that holds deep meaning for the community. As a place of remembrance, mourning, and action, it has become a symbol of the ongoing struggle for justice and equality, despite attempts by the city to assert control and power over the space. The caretakers of the square and many other volunteers use ritualized actions to push back through the intentional maintenance of the space, fighting to protect it and uplift its sacredness so that it can remain a place that holds room for a powerful and radical community. There is a lot to learn from George Floyd Square. The Square is a visual representation of resilience and determination, and although complicated, it provides me with an immense sense of hope. It is not free from conflict, nowhere is, but it does not run away from that. Instead, the community learns from

it. It takes knowing the community to know what is really needed for the community, and here, through ritual action, the knowing and seeing of the community is real, which makes real action possible. I wonder what could be gained if we began to look for the rituals we encounter in our own communities, and considered their impacts on the way we see ourselves and the greater world around us. I think that by becoming more aware and alert to the rituals of our culture and the social function of them, we may notice the power of ritual, therefore becoming increasingly able

to utilize the potential within ritual to strengthen and unify community towards a real and tangible future in which peace and collective healing may be possible.

## Endnotes

1. Bell Catherine M. 1992. *Ritual Theory Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Douglas Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger; an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Praeger.

• SAVE THE DATE •

# Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

**Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota | July 10-12, 2023**

**Topic: *So That Faculty, Administrators, and Staff, Too, May Flourish***

The foundational document of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities has it that we are “called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish.” Echoing this central purpose, a new book by 15 educators at NECU institutions is entitled, *So That All May Flourish* (Fortress Press 2023). And yet, we all know—and many experience first-hand—the unprecedented degree of fatigue and burnout among educators these days, which is culminating in a “great resignation.” How do we educators care for ourselves and “neighbor” one another, even as we care for students experiencing their own stresses and anxieties? What Lutheran theological roots and institutional practices empower educators not simply to survive our overlapping crises, but to become fully alive—to flourish—in mind, body and spirit? The 2023 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference will bring together faculty, staff, and administrators from the NECU community to envision, plan for, and partake in a community where all may flourish.