

Ritual Action ↔ Global Action

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The world is a mess. Of course, this is nothing new, but it is our time, our generation's watch. The stunning attack on our buildings, our neighborhoods, and our people on 9/11 stirred fear and hatred. Then, it was Hurricane Katrina, a shocking disaster in the Gulf Coast that was described as absolute chaos: no shelter, food, clean water, medicine, safety, no way out, and in their place, fear, lies, violence, and heart-breaking loss. Some of us had thought we were protected from this chaos.

Since then there have been more and more natural disasters. In 2005, only days before I made this presentation, tens of thousands of people were buried alive, and forty-three thousand injured, in Pakistan, in India, and in Guatemala. We had seen the affects of such devastation before in Indonesia. And there is war, a reality that never, ever ends. What can we say about ritual actions in the face of the mess of our world?

When we gather together for worship we practice ways of living and dying. We prepare ourselves for the choices that will confront us personally, as a nation, and as citizens in a global society. Our ways of relating to God and to one another in worship, that is, the patterns and content of our prayers, our singing, our listening, and our actions extend far beyond structures and interpreted meanings. These ways of being become part of us; they get under our skin, so that when something is a stake we know what to do.

Aidan Kavanagh reminded us, in this very place, that when a community of people assembles regularly to remember, imagine, and embody the presence of a living God, something happens. We change palpably into something we are not when the event begins. The change happens gradually and unpredictably, as in a great act of making music. It happens as we are brought to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God, a force so powerful that it causes one's hair to stand on end, one's flesh to creep.¹

Kavanagh wrote these words in the early eighties: Ronald Reagan was president of the United States; Sandra Day O'Connor was newly appointed to the Supreme Court; Russia was called the evil empire; AIDS had just been identified; personal computers were introduced, movements for civil rights engaged every level of our common life, and solving the problem of poverty was the responsibility of poor people.

Personal Statement

I began my work at Union Seminary in those years, beginning in 1981. Donald Shriver, the president at the time, invited me to join the faculty to coordinate the worship in a newly renovated chapel. Instead of fixed pews, altar, and pulpit we had a totally flexible space, with only the organ permanently located. The student body, too, had changed since the original chapel was conceived. Then, the founders, faculty, and students were primarily white men.

Priorities about worshiping were evolving, too. Shriver envisioned two objectives for the community that would gather in this new space: that our worship life would reflect the differences of background and traditions among us, and that worship would be more at the center of our work and our study. So, we initiated daily instead of weekly worship, using forms

and symbols from the wide spread of historical and cultural traditions in our community. The questions we were asking ourselves then were the same as those we confronted in our congregations at the time: How can we model in our worship a way of living in a multicultural world? What do our ritual actions form us to do? We focused on details: different kinds of music, varied movements that suited our bodies, many arrangements of people and furniture in this splendid new space, a mix of borrowed, new, and traditional words and images to name ourselves, our world, our God. We learned what we desired from our worship by doing it.

After twenty-five years of exploring old and new languages, verbal and nonverbal, I am still asking:

- How do our ritual actions matter, how do they make any difference in what we do, day to day, as citizens of an interdependent world?
- What does it mean today to be “brought regularly to the edge of chaos,” to change into something new, together, in the presence of a living God?

I began thinking about answers to these questions by reflecting on how our Christian ritual forms evolved in order to discover what that story may suggest to us today. Though not without controversy, and certainly not all at once, within one hundred and fifty years our early Christian ritual forms changed significantly—from small social groups gathered around a meal as part of a Jesus movement, to one table, one presider, and no meal except bread and wine. By the fourth century Christian worship was imitating ceremonial patterns of the Roman Empire. The spaces were large public buildings. Bishops and priests dressed like civic leaders. The patterns for public prayer became more formal and fixed with little, if any, room for extemporaneous participation. Music was heard, more than made by all. And the experience of God was of a distant judging presence. In Larry Rasmussen’s words,

The church’s God became the empire’s God . . . [The Church,] less and less [a] pre-Constantine pilgrim community, struggling to make community in a world not yet its home, [became] more and more the empire’s standing agent of salvation . . . With Christianity established as both the church’s faith and the empire’s civil religion, the theocentric and communitarian way of Jesus was largely lost.²

These imperial ritual structures encouraged watching rather than talking, adoring instead of doing, and individual devotion rather than collective action. Changes resulting from the Protestant reformation, and the contributions of Vatican II in the twentieth century, have brought about significant adjustments in this imperial ecclesiology, in form and in content, but in most liturgical communities today a few leaders still dominate, and their power determines what everyone else can do. Of course there are exceptions, but I am speaking generally.

Imperial Ritual Forms

We know that an imperial form of ecclesiology is not neutral in its effect. The French social theorist Louis Althusser points out something we can trace from our Christian history, that any ideology endowed with a structure and a functioning becomes an omni-historical reality, making the structure and functioning immutable. We are schooled to know our place in it. In fact, we practice knowing our place every time we come together.³

The ideology at work in an imperial church is defined by an unambiguous division between clergy and people with a role-defined access to power. What is the problem? Just this: imperial ritual contradicts the very heart of the witness of Jesus, a life marked by radical equality, by actions that dissolved socially-inscribed inequalities and challenged the status quo.⁴ Imperial rituals, with clear spatial separation between clergy and laity, with clergy elaborately dressed and elevated above the congregation, compromise defiant stances against the powers of the empire.

So too today. Imperial ritual forms diminish the effectiveness of public worship as a vehicle for prophetic action. I suggest three reasons among many why this is so:

1. Imperial rituals strengthen imperial attitudes, that is, only a few have power and access. Isolation of power reinforces dominance, dominance promotes deference, deference undergirds passivity, and passivity contributes to apathy and indifference. In a ritual that expresses religious beliefs these imperial attitudes appear to be divinely sanctioned. Haves and have nots, some in and some out, some worthy and some less worthy—these assumptions are reinforced as integral aspects of our faith. Because in our ritualizing we are practicing a way of living, these attitudes spill over into our day-to-day existence, too. We live out capitulation instead of defiance. The implications are widespread and death-dealing.

We can be the generation that no longer accepts that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies, but will we be that generation? Will we in the West realize our potential, or will we sleep in the comfort of our affluence with apathy and indifference murmuring softly in our ears.⁵

2. Imperial attitudes affirm nationalism, exceptionalism, and colonialism, where a nation or a group of people know better than others, are more important than others, even seemingly have a right to conquer others.⁶ Such imperial attitudes have contributed to a world where resources are disproportionately distributed and where our social fabric is marked by addictions to greed and militarism. These characteristics are not new, but something else is: developments in technology have flattened our world, making competition on a level playing field possible for more and more countries, as Thomas Friedman has pointed out. In fact, Friedman adds this warning regularly: we can collaborate, share knowledge, and work together, or we can wall ourselves in and risk the perils of an excess of protectionism, of excessive fears (of terrorism) in search of economic security.⁷ Flatness and crisis are inextricably related to nationalism. As the historian Fritz Stern warns us, nationalism goes hand in hand with a “mass manipulation of public opinion, often mixed with mendacity and forms of intimidation.”⁸

3. Exceptionalism and nationalism affirm a one-sided view of goodness. Only some know it, only some practice it. “We have given in to haughty pretensions that our country has all goodness as well as all might and all right, and that we have somehow been ordained by God to rid the world of anything we perceive as evil,” says the liturgical scholar Gabe Huck.⁹

Of course I am not assuming that ritual actions alone can change the mess of our world. But I am suggesting that ritual actions matter, and that imperial ritual forms support a world order that undermines the prophetic character of our faith. And I am recommending that this is the time for a new layer in the evolution of liturgical forms, ritual actions characterized by reversal, access, resistance, and, at times, defiance.

Emerging Liturgical Practices: Some Examples

A contemporary movement to eliminate poverty. For many years I have had friends among those barely housed in New York City. Though early on I imagined their situations would change, I grew to understand that their fragile dwellings provided more privacy, solitude, and dignity than city-run shelters, and often more opportunities to create communities that sustained and protected them. A few years ago Union Seminary students introduced me to an organization among such street dwellers and other low-income people that did not stop with friendship. It is called the University of the Poor.¹⁰ The educational arm of the Poor People's Human Rights Campaign, its aim is to unite people across color lines as a leadership base for a broad movement to abolish poverty. Two of its leaders live and work at Union Seminary: Willie Baptist, formerly homeless, now a scholar in residence, and Liz Theoharis, a Ph.D. student in New Testament. Willie Baptist describes the motivation behind this movement: "In this country, we are not dealing with scarcity, but abundance and abandonment, the abandonment of a whole segment of society. When people who are most affected by a situation mobilize, historically that is how changes in the system are made."¹¹

The leaders of this movement are not naïve. They know what it takes to live with dignity against all odds, to create a movement when the majority of the world wants them to disappear. They also know what is required to change perceptions within themselves, and to confront and convince the powerful leaders of our world to reverse direction. Inspired by the possibilities and processes of civil rights movements, they press forward together to eliminate poverty, urged on by these words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life."¹²

A new and unsettling force happened one day at Union Seminary when people poor, illiterate and literate, of varied backgrounds and nationalities, came to lead a memorial service for their friends and family who are buried in Potter's Field on Hart Island in New York City. Eight hundred thousand indigent and friendless people are buried in Potter's Field, stacked one on top of another, one hundred adults or one thousand children in each trench. Only a few people are identified by name: instead, they are labeled John Doe, Jane Doe, and Baby Doe. For most of its existence no one except the prisoners who bury the bodies had been allowed to visit the graves. With the help of one of our students, Amy Gopp, two groups of people who are poor—Picture the Homeless,¹³ and Broadway Community, Inc.—conceived and led a memorial service to restore basic human dignity to those buried there, and to honor their lives. Friends and families from the streets, subways, and shelters claimed their power to reverse the invisibility that inevitably accompanies poverty. After months of planning and practicing they led a community made up homeless people and their friends, along with faculty, staff, and students from Union, in chilling song, expectant prayer, passionate reading, and angry preaching. Entitled "With All Due Respect," the liturgy was particularly fueled by the fact that a good friend, Lewis Haggins, the founder of "Picture the Homeless," had no name in death, as if no legacy.¹⁴

Toward the end of the liturgy the leaders invited everyone to participate in two actions, lighting a candle, and writing the name of someone buried in Potter's Field. We, the comfortably housed and the barely housed, moved together, using light to remember that every person leaves a trace on this earth, and writing real names on small post-its to cover the Doe labels fixed on a

temporary wall. Some of us knew many names, some only a few, some none at all, but everyone could respond with some small and powerful act of reversal, access, and resistance. When we finished fixing the names on the wall, we saw that the arrangement created three more words, spelling the phrase, "We are there." It was a breathtaking, unexpected moment, an experience of truth telling, of power, of freedom beyond anything anyone could have predicted. We, every one of us, were there, there among the anonymous, the forgotten, there where some count and others do not, there too where some took first steps to resist and reverse inhuman treatment. Together we created a moment of deep knowing that penetrated our flesh, or, as Aidan Kavanagh phrased it, of "chaos in the presence of the living God."

The work of the liturgical theologian Siobhán Garrigan sheds light on what happened that day. In her book, *Beyond Ritual*, she develops an understanding of sacrament using Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action.¹⁵ The following four concepts from her work offer a framework for examining the experience of this liturgical action:

1. *Communicative action is a process of truth-making that sees truth as a process and not as an outcome.* People who are poor led us with care, respect, and raw emotion to assert our authority where it had been denied. They asked the gathered community to stop for a moment in order to understand what it feels like when a friend or family member is so disposable that he or she is buried without a name. Disposable in life and disposable in death. This ritual engaged us in a gradual process of communicative action. We listened attentively to searing music, to angry words; we prayed in expectation that something would happen. Our listening culminated in action, a small step toward claiming power and access where there had been none. Together we named the unnamed. We moved as one body to resist what had been denied and to enact what is true: every person matters. We practiced what truth-making feels like.

2. *Communicative action brings about understanding, not necessarily agreement.* Some at the liturgy were experts in poverty, that is, they were living in the grasp of its terror day in and day out. Others knew about poverty through analysis and study. Some were afraid of poor people, and were dipping their fingers in the water of poverty very hesitantly. For a brief thirty minutes, together we heard the same words and sounds, we walked together and watched each other. Something happened, a knowing permeated our bodies. What we experienced was not the same for everyone, but something stirred in each person.

3. *We know God as our very relating to each and every aspect of that to which we are related.* A new community formed itself during that time. Those who spend day and night studying about God were face to face with people whose daily survival is about shelter and food. Where is God? Who is God? For just a moment, as a temporary community, we glimpsed God through each other's lenses. We reached across our feelings, our awkwardness, and our different kinds of knowing to hear and act with each other and to show each other embodied faith. We discovered something of God in the spaces of unknowing. The playwright Tony Kushner uses these words to describe aspects of such a divine/human relationship: "Being politically active for the citizens of a democracy may be the best way of speaking to God and hearing Her answer: You exist. If we are active, if we are activist, She replies to us. You specifically exist. Mazel tov. Now get busy, She replies. Maintain the world by changing the world."¹⁶

4. *A sacrament is a series of connected moments of consensus, openness to the Other, belief in the stories of the Other, a statement of utter connectivity between one's self and the Other.* No one person could have brought about what happened that day. No one can say for sure what

happened inside others, but very few people hurried out at the end of service. Some sat together in silence holding one another; others went together to look at the memorial wall and tell stories about those named; others just sat and talked. We experienced moments of utter connectivity. There was a brief moment of hope. We practiced together a vision of what might be. It was a time when we knew what access meant: with God, with one another, across deep, one might say impossible, chasms.

Communities of resistance. In the spring of 2005 tomato pickers from Immokalee, Florida, successfully won their case against the Yum corporation, the company that owns Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and others fast foods. A small group of seasonal farm workers, with the help of church-related communities, forced a multinational corporation not only to acknowledge the human rights abuses at the heart of their production of tomatoes, but also to take one small step to rectify their injustice.

One of the early strategies in this campaign was a theater performance. The workers, many of whom were from Chiapas, Mexico, invited Ralph Lee, mask-maker and theater director from New York, to help them tell their story. They knew Lee from his time in Chiapas, where one month a year he worked with a local Mayan writers' collective, Sna Jtz' ibajom, to tell the stories of the Mayan people through a combination of folk materials, historical events, and the realities of the current political situation. Something happened as they watched their own stories unfold. They felt less powerless.

The tomato pickers wanted to try the same strategy in Immokolee. Using masks and improvised words Lee helped them create performances for one another about their day-to-day experiences as farm workers. Lee created a giant tomato as a focus for their feelings about their boss. They called it "Don Tomato." It became a central symbol of their resistance, enabling defiance and urging courage through the many years of the campaign. Don Tomato accompanied many public actions against the Yum corporation.¹⁷

Something similar happened in one of the daily worship services at Union Seminary. A student, Elizabeth Schell, made a six-foot object that she called Big Woman. She cut it into twelve pieces, and placed them throughout our chapel. When the community came together for the regular noon worship we were instructed to wait outside the doors. There we listened to the ancient, dreadful story in Judges 19 of an unnamed concubine, gang-raped throughout the night, whose body was cut into twelve pieces which were sent to the twelve tribes of Israel. After hearing the story the community walked into the chapel and saw a dismembered body scattered all over the floor. During the course of this liturgy we picked up the pieces; we read names of women who had been sexually violated which had been written on each piece; we called out images of a ravaged earth devastated by human greed. Toward the end of liturgy we tied the pieces together, carried the Big Woman to the foot of the cross, and added more names and images from our own experiences.

These artifacts, the giant tomato and the mutilated woman's body, connected the community. They called forth storytelling, just as the Potter's Field memorial service had done. They focused the power of dominance so that the community could see, feel, and touch it. Stories of suffering and greed wove a new fabric of human experience. Listening replaced silence, speech overflowed into action. The community moved from isolation to relatedness, from relatedness to resistance. Openness flowed into a taste of freedom.

An ancient form recovered and adapted. The momentum to discover ritual forms that honor every person's voice has led us at Union to experiment with an ancient ritual made new in our time. We call it "At Table."¹⁸ Once a month we gather around tables in groups of eight. We eat a substantial meal together, listen and tell stories, sing, speak to one another about what is on our hearts and minds, and reflect on important issues in our lives. The form of this meal draws on a similar ritual action of the earliest Christians and Jews, a meal practice that was itself based on earlier Greco-Roman meal practices.

Several aspects of this experience are particularly significant in supporting the position of this paper. As human beings, eating is our most fundamental social practice. (Sit-ins at lunch counters were critically important in the civil rights struggle.) Listening to each other in the midst of an intimate gathering, and speaking through the realities of our lives, urges honest reflection. The community refers to this table-sharing as "precious sacred space and sacred time," a bodying forth of God among us.

At the beginning of the meal conversation centers on catching up, or getting to know a new person. That too is critical, since the whole experience depends on respecting each person's contribution. Together we listen to a common story, the choice of the storyteller for the day. Sometimes the story is taken from ancient, sacred sources, canonical and not, sometimes from contemporary experiences. At the end of the story the storyteller poses a question for our continued conversation. It may be as simple as "When did you have the courage to speak when you were afraid?" Inevitably the question moves us beyond the first layer of connection, in order to connect our lives to our larger world, to imagine how our beliefs and actions in this safe space can affect what we do beyond it. The structure is always familiar, but everything within the order is improvised, that is, one person's speaking and listening relates to another. In Siobhán Garrigan's words, "it is a series of connected moments of consensus, openness to the Other, belief in the stories of the Other, a statement of utter connectivity between one's self and the Other."

Laurel Stevens Guntzel describes her experience with this alternative liturgical form:

I am a faithful person without a faith community. I am an activist without a social justice community. I struggle with burnout, cynicism, and despair. I am one of many who yearn to do something about the structurally embedded violence in our world, and to work from a place of spiritual wholeness. I look to our At Table rituals as a place of sustenance and support, food, friendship and spirit, which emboldens us to live the lives, we are called to live.¹⁹

The world is a mess. So what do we do? Give up? Accept the mess as inevitable? The powers that claim imperialism, domination, nationalism as solutions to the world's challenges are pervasive, manipulative, and wealthy. Poor people's communities, artists, restless young people, and determined critics of an empire-centered world imagine alternative ways. Our ritual actions and our global actions exist in a circle of dynamic overlapping energy and insight. In our ritualizing we practice a way of responding to global needs. The form and content are inextricably connected to what our ritual means. Imperial ritual forms do not prepare us to act against imperialism in day-to-day life. These times demand ritualizing of a different kind, where every person matters, not some more than others, and where every person's story is heard as one of a number of sacred texts, not some rather than others. Such honoring requires listening

and speaking, attention and intention, with our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. These ritual actions may not be polished, and may not be as immediately satisfying as some of our time-honored, prescribed, and well-honed liturgical forms. We are not skilled in hearing one another, and in speaking in our own names, as an integral part of our regular worship actions. However, the chaos that emerges from our worlds' priorities, where more people than not die from the indifference, apathy, and timidity of others, requires ritualizing that steps intentionally into the brink of chaos. There, face to face with a living God, individually and collectively, we practice what to do in our world, and we find courage to do it.

ENDNOTES

This paper was originally presented with illustrations.

1. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 73–95.
2. Larry Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments & Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 141.
3. Adapted from Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 108–9.
4. Larry Rasmussen, “Jesus, the American Empire and Church Leadership”: three lectures presented at the Santa Fe Theologians Institute, February 19, 2005. Quoted with permission.
5. Bono, quoted by Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), xvii.
6. I am defining exceptionalism in the words Irving Babbitt applied to the U.S. in 1924: “We are willing to admit that all other nations are self-seeking, but as for ourselves, we hold that we act only on the most disinterested motives.” Quoted by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 25.
7. See Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, 2006, 2007).
8. Quoted by Chris Hedges, “Warning from a Student of Democracy’s Collapse,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2005.
9. Words from a homily included in an email to friends.
10. The University of the Poor was conceived in October of 1999 when over fifty poor people’s groups came together for the **March of the Americas**, a month-long march from Washington, D.C., to the United Nations in New York City.
11. From a presentation given in January 2006 that examined the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

12. Quoted from the Massey Lectures to the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, December 1967.

13. Picture the Homeless, an organization founded and led by homeless people, expresses refusal and defiance in its mission statement: “We refuse to accept being neglected, and we demand that our voices and experience are heard at all levels of decision-making that impact us” (www.picturethehomeless.org).

14. See Amy Gopp, “Ritualizing with the Poor: The Potter’s Field Memorial Service,” in *New and Borrowed Rites*, ed. Siobhán Garrigan and Janet Walton. Liturgy no. 23.

15. See Siobhán Garrigan, *Beyond Ritual: Sacramental Theology after Habermas* (Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 97–140.

16. Tony Kushner, “Despair Is a Lie We Tell Ourselves,” in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen’s Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, ed. Paul Rogat Loeb (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 170.

17. The Immokolee workers won their first victory with Taco Bell in April 2007.

18. This experiment emerged from the work of a seminar on ritual meals led by Professors Hal Taussig and Janet Walton, and has continued for three years.

19. Unpublished paper. Used with the author’s permission.

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