

Consensus

Volume 31

Issue 1 *Preaching the Gospel in Canada in the 21st Century*

Article 3

5-1-2006

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Eileen Scully

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Recommended Citation

Scully, Eileen (2006) "Born to mutual conversation," *Consensus*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol31/iss1/3>

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Born to Mutual Conversation

Eileen Scully

*Consultant for Ministry and Worship
General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada*

The title of this essay is drawn from a dictum of Philip Melancthon,¹ chosen here to focus two dialogical concepts: 1) that authentic Christian living is the engagement of a mutual conversation of our lives with the life of God and the life of the world; and 2) that liturgical preaching is one voice in an ecclesial dialogue that nurtures the *raison d'être* of the church – that we gather to imagine and live the kingdom. I write as one who is in the place far more often of listening to sermons rather than preaching – on the other side of this preaching conversation. We need each other: the extent to which the preacher is engaged in the lives and ministries of the *laos*² has a lot to do with shaping the integrity of preaching; preaching, then, feeds the *laos* in the theological function at the ground of discipleship: our discernment and interpretation of the world in light of the grace made known to us in the Gospel. Together we form a preaching community.

I am particularly interested in the character of discourse in our preaching community. Is it indeed a dialogue, an honourable conversation? Does it have integrity? Does it assist us well in our discipleship, in our being who we are in God's world? This is an essay exploring the meaning of integrity in the preaching conversation – and as such probably more an ecclesiological reflection than a homiletic one; I leave the latter to the specialists, without apology – how we seek integrity in the theological function that is preaching is an ecclesiastical task.

I take two concrete contextual realities into consideration here. My (urban, mainly white, Ontario) Anglican parish family is among many other concerns, puzzled by two overwhelming matters. One is how to *think through* the issues of culpability and responsibility related to the legacies of the Indian Residential School system. They have worked to come up with our allotted share in the monies necessary to fulfill our obligations to the settlement fund toward reparations to victims of abuse,³ and have even done so with great

enthusiasm. However, many are unsure what to make of what is going on in it all. All express sympathy for victims of sexual abuse; some are unsure what to make of physical abuse claims that were “part of the culture of the time.” Many others are debating what it means to have “historical hindsight” – should we in the present be held responsible for sins of the past? How do we think about guilt and sin and history and what’s going on between indigenous peoples and the rest of us now? Beyond “doing good works” it is difficult for some to see anything of gospel-importance in the current situation; and some even question whether the kind of justice being sought indeed is “good works.”

The other set of realities and concerns floating around in my parish have to do with the debates over same-gender marriages/unions/blessings, and there are two sets of questions. There is, in this particular context, relatively little debate about whether or not homosexuality is a sin – though it is clear there are divergent views within the congregation. Perhaps the lack of conversation is indicative of a fear of conversation, a timidity of confronting difference. There *is much* conversation about the wider ecclesial conflicts, however, which seem more content to linger at the level of the theoretical and intra-ecclesial: questions about what limits we ought to place on what kinds of difference we allow within the church.

Each of these sets of concerns raises for me questions about the nature and quality of our conversations, and, for the purposes of this essay, questions about how we preach effectively within the complexities of these “issues.” Underlying the “issues” are profoundly simple (in their foundational structure) questions about the church – who in the world we are. Related to this are important matters of how we engage honest mutual conversation with “otherness”: the otherness of anthropological difference (both in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, as well as in terms of Indigenous peoples), the otherness of our own selves-in-history, and ultimately the otherness of God. Effective preaching is that which assists us all in discerning our way through the forces that prevent such honesty before God, each other and our selves.

Without proposing tidy solutions to the complex questions of our context, I offer reflections on *ways* in which we might attend to these questions in order to shape effective preaching, and within this some

theological touch-stones that ought to shape the preaching community.

Liturgy shaping Life

“Show me, deare Christ, thy Spouse, so bright and clear.”⁴ – John Donne

I like to read Donne’s plea in light of Paul’s own, that the world is waiting for the children of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19). This dual reading reminds me that a) it is to Christ to tell us who the church is, and b) that the church exists for the world. In a context where popular representation of the church in the media is apt to focus on those aspects of church which are less than Christ-like, we as that body need to be reminded who and whose we are. The best ecclesiological reflection (thinking about who and what the church is) begins not by us thinking about ourselves, but by thinking about the call that gathers, feeds and disperses us. In times of crisis, real or perceived, such as those currently being experienced over theological, ethical and cultural diversities within the church and attendant questions around authority and jurisdiction, Bonhoeffer’s words sound with sobriety: “... our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable to taking the word or reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease.”⁵ We are not the end in and of ourselves; Christian unity is not for the sake of unity itself. We gather and are dispersed for the sake of God’s activity in Jesus Christ.

So how do we, who are, after all, that “Spouse,” best look at ourselves? Not by primping in front of a mirror in whatever way we might mug for the media camera. We do best to look at how we gather and disperse. The *ekklesia* is, to use Gordon Lathrop’s language, the assembly of people who do those central things – those gathering-and-dispersing things that identify them as Christian.

The church begins to know itself not by contemplating its own identity, but by beholding the face of Christ in that word, bath and table that manifest God’s identity. In these things the church is filled with the power of that Spirit to bear witness in the world to the truth about God. The meeting for worship is itself the ground and becoming of such witness. The meeting for worship itself is the church becoming church.⁶

The church is the people gathered for worship and dispersed for life. In all that, the church's first voice, its *theological prima* is that of prayer. In an article published before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams argues that it is in our language addressed to God that the integrity of our theological language is located. "The language of worship ascribes supreme value, supreme resource or power, to something other than the worshipper, so that liturgy attempts to be a 'giving over' of our words to God (as opposed to speaking in a way that seeks to retain distance or control over what's being spoken of: it is in this sense that good liturgy does what good poetry does)."⁷

Williams' thoughts on the nature of good theological language reflect longstanding Anglican tradition that lives by *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Loosely translated as "the law of prayer is the law of belief," the patristic dictum was intended simply to serve as a reminder: "the theologian is one whose prayer is true" (Evagrius of Pontus).⁸ It has borne the unfortunate warping to be read as though liturgical texts themselves govern the discourse of theology. Nothing could be further than the intention of the original patristic tradition,⁹ in which theological reflection was understood as an intimately liturgical act, dependent upon and feeding the life of the worshipping community. Furthermore, the *lex orandi* refers to a whole life, not prayer texts: the gathering-and-dispersing of the community of the baptized to remember and celebrate the presence of God in Christ with them, and to pray for the world.¹⁰

Two things are of central concern to me here. One is that the worshipping community – that is, the church – sees its self, its collective soul, as bound up in worship-and-engagement with the world as inextricably linked in a way that is non-linear and non-causal, but of such a hypostasis that can only be created by a strong eschatological faith. The other is that the language of *lex orandi* also bears that eschatological faith, and does it best in the language of mystery and poetry that is *iconic* – that is, it invites us *into* the reality about which it speaks.¹¹

In a recent article on the *Didache*, Dirk Lange reads the early Christian community's doxological formation as the gathering-and-dispersion of the people who by baptism are "not initiated into a secret rite but ... kept from the world in order to dialogue with the world."¹² Relatively light in terms of liturgical "regulation" or

“rubrics” as we would know them, the *Didache* uses more poetically evocative language to draw communities in to the “rule of life” it describes, by evoking the very nature of that rule of life in its style. It is not *instructive* as in a liturgical manual. In fact it appears far less concerned even for example with the words of institution and the obedient repetition of rite, than with carrying on of the transformative meal tradition and the giving of thanks and adoration – and its language is doxological.

The bread and wine language of the early church is eschatological and *iconic*. Liturgical historians point to the early symbolic meaning of the wine as the new covenant that breaks open Israel, the holy people, to the world of other people.¹³ To raise the cup and partake of the wine is to acclaim the identity of the gathering as God’s people of the new covenant, and to invite others into that new covenant, to be grafted onto the vine.¹⁴ Similarly, the bread, made of many ingredients, and broken into many pieces, “becomes the symbol of the unity of the gathering, just as all the bread lay scattered upon the mountains and became one when it had been gathered, ‘so may your church be gathered into your kingdom from the ends of the earth’ (9:4).” Furthermore, as fundamentally the symbol of the presence of the crucified and risen Christ, and our participation in that life, the bread holds an eschatological meaning that Lang fleshes out:

already now we have been made partakers of Christ’s life and knowledge, but we are also awaiting the day of universal communion when all peoples shall be so gathered. Is the ‘broken’ bread a suggestion that the community needs to immerse itself in that tension, that is, take seriously the realization that it is not, and will never be, a ‘fully realized’ communion?¹⁵

The Eucharistic liturgy, as celebrated in the *Didache*, “is both a moment of gathering and a moment of dispersion. It encompasses life.”¹⁶ Lange goes on to explore the pattern of hospitality and instruction of catechumens, which he characterizes as a non-linear juxtaposition of instruction, welcome, bath and table. Examples both of “teaching then bath *and* bath then teaching, welcome then table *and* table then welcome”¹⁷ suggest a very rich realized eschatology at the heart of the community’s life. In the present context, I would suggest, whatever very good work the reclamation of the catechumenal process has led to in our congregations, it would do us well to reflect on the ways in which a linear process of incorporation

into membership can tempt us to flatten the eschatological dimension of who we are as church. One of the distressing conundrums that we face by rightly guarding the table for the baptised, is that we can fall into thinking that the bath *makes* the table, or worse, that the meal *belongs* to the baptised, the church. In the pattern of the *Didache*, we see a breaking-in-and-out of the community – a far more intentionally porous and self-reforming boundary system. In the living eschatological meal tradition, the gift of the eucharist, while gathering, feeding and serving the community, is maintained in its deepest sense as gift for the world. The juxtaposition in the catechumental process, coupled with the deep and wide eschatology of the eucharistic theology creates a deeper level of meaning: “we are beyond cause and effect. We are at the cross and in the resurrection; we are at table and with the poor.”¹⁸

Ethics is no “working out” of the implications of eucharistic memory – it is intimately present within the *raison d’être* of the church: that the eucharistic *anamnesis* is for the sake of the world.

The community responds to the healing memory of the meal tradition by turning itself as community to the world. Its ‘ethics’ is this on-going welcome, admonition, teaching, incorporation, and sending out again. Its ‘ethics’ is a holiness which finds its first expression in the world of symbolic (and deeply poetic) language producing, not a standard of living, a rule of conduct, a model for imitation, but a memory and an intense dialogue with its context.¹⁹

This baptismal community is charged to “to break open towards the surrounding world.” “Rather than removing the responsibility to the neighbour, the gospel injunctions...turn the believer to the other. Baptism becomes, not an initiation rite into a closed society of the “saved” but an identity as a welcoming people.”²⁰

The proximity of the *Didache* community to the prophetic imagination and eschatological faith make the possible – even vibrant – the intimacy of discipleship and doxology, everyday life and Sunday worship. It is a voice we need to hear in the sin-warp temptation of dualism that is always with us. I borrow from Edward Farley, who speaks of the challenges of popular piety, which he describes as the “inescapable need to finitize the sacred by identifying it with the ethnocentric, egocentric, and culturally originated beliefs, casuistries, texts, authorities and emotion-laden certainties of the religious community.”²¹ This Farley contrasts with

the “prophetic, transcendent, and metaphorical (faith) . . . , rooted in the fact that the religious community had to do with a sacred Presence.”²² However you name it, the force at work here is the domestication of the transcendent,²³ and is the sin at work when we claim *ownership* of the Gospel rather than acknowledging and living out our being-claimed-by-it; or when our own anxious systems simply can’t look up from their own anxieties long enough to behold the Gospel that breaks us out of the clutches of fear. Farley says its most common symptom is in the suppression of the metaphorical and mysterious in our preaching language:

When metaphor is suppressed, the Bible’s authority is thought to be rooted in a communication of truths originally known by God to selected human authors. . . . Without metaphorical qualification, God is preached simply as a specific entity: a male, a monarch, a judge, a punisher. . . . In other words, *what-is-preached* is not only the Bible, but an interpretation of the Bible that suppresses metaphor and mystery. To repeat, no religious community avoids the finitizing idolatry of popular religion, and that means also that no preaching avoids it.²⁴

What is going on is nothing less than the oppression of Mystery. In relational terms, “Oppression is a situation where people don’t talk to each other; where people don’t find each other difficult. One party’s language reaches out to incorporate the other’s experience, which cannot speak for itself.”²⁵

High boundary maintenance around church membership (who is “in” and who is “out”) – in the worst example a recurrence of new forms of purity codes (who is deemed to be too sinful for us to admit to communion) is one symptom of ecclesial illness in need of a high dose of prophetic imagination. We need the work of the prophetic, which “is ever at work casting suspicion on popular religion’s literalistic tendencies, world constructions, and claims of identity with God.”²⁶ The work of preaching the Gospel, I draw from this, must reclaim mystery and metaphor in our language to, in a sense, keep us in our place, and so be able to lift us out of that place into the realm where our imaginations are redeemed and set free to imagine and live the eschatological in-breaking of the realm of God, reminding us of the dependence of all our human constructs and claims on this redemptive work of God. There is a way in which the use of metaphor draws us closer into the realism of the Gospel. The realism of the Gospel is the being-at-meal with “sinner” and finding

ourselves too to be “sinner.” It confronts status quo judgements on the Syrophenician woman and allows the realism of her own voice to define who she is. The realism of the Gospel confronts anxious systems with the folly of their anxiety.

The realism of the Gospel, when enacted within the worshipping community, helps to keep the centre, to bring a corrective, *semper reformanda* centring to our life as church. “If baptism and Supper, public thanksgiving and public absolution, and the nontriumphalist solidarity of the assembly with the wretched of the world mark the church so that we can see it, then those things need to occupy the heart of our meetings.”²⁷ The reverse is also true!

At the Edge of Mystery

The reason why the sin of “popular piety” is always with us is human nature, sin, frailty, our inability to fully live our redemption absorbed by our desire to possess it: our desire for, and giftedness with absolute Love eaten by our fear of it.

There *are* points at which either mystery seems to crash in upon us or our confidence in human competencies is stretched so thin as to become transparent, thus disclosing the mysteriousness of our loves, of life, of the existence of anything at all. But, for the most part, inhabitants of late modernity are not well equipped to manage this when it happens; on the whole we prefer not to have to come too near the ‘edge of the platform’; we prefer to be further back where we feel we have some control and where (mostly) we can ‘make sense’ of things.²⁸

The way in which we “make sense of things” is in the negotiation of the space between the “edge” and where we are standing. Graham Hughes, the author of the paragraph above, has explored the ways in which different major Christian worship traditions have negotiated the space between modernity and Gospel, exploring traditionalism or “Church Theology,” “Evangelical” (fundamentalist) and “Mainstream Protestant.” In the first he places such theologians as Geoffrey Wainright (Methodist!) and a tradition of Roman Catholic liturgical theologians whose approach seems to be that by getting back to the heart of the catholic liturgical tradition and by drawing out the fullness of meaning from this deposit of wisdom, our lives are enriched today. While I find his treatment of this class of theologians overly simplistic (he seems to infer that the historical approach sees

itself as an end in and of itself), his point is that this cadre of liturgists do not engage adequately with the present context in order there to find sources of meaning-making for liturgy. Of the “Mainline Protestants” he argues that the Liberal theological tendencies of the mid to late 20th century have assumed too strong a connection between the mysterious presence of God and what we can actually sense within this world – liturgy ought to function here to draw out an awareness of God’s grace within the ordinariness of life. Liberal theology says, according to Hughes, that

...people construct their meanings from the recourses of meaning available to them. The problem or dilemma for theologians of this tradition is that the world to which they have earnestly directed people’s attention does *not* offer religious meanings. It is a self-consciously *autonomous* world ... (T)he consistent approach of the (mainline) theologians ... is that when it is attended to *in depth* ordinary existence discloses ‘intimations of transcendence’... Rather than deprecating the conventional forms, the ritual practices and the designated places through which or in which people have traditionally encountered God, ... Protestant leaders might have done better in looking for the ways of *creating sanctuary* for people overwhelmed by ordinariness, in trying to *generate sacral spaces* as genuine alternatives to mundanity.²⁹

The discourse of liberalism is too enmeshed in its context to be able adequately to judge it or discern within it.

For Evangelicals, Hughes saves the most type. For this group (more commonly referred to as Conservative Evangelical or self-proclaimed Fundamentalist in North America), the relationship with culture is more complex than at first it might appear. While rejecting much of modernity, this family of Christianity also draws on certain closely guarded values of the surrounding culture, such as informality, immediacy, and the dependence on language, which they draw deeply into their worship, with limiting effect.

When every other signifying medium is directly continuous with the secular environment – otherwise said, when ritual process, spatial semiosis and designated leadership have been written out of the equation – the one channel left in which to communicate ‘God’ or ‘transcendence’ or ‘otherness’ is the linguistic one. Music is a case in point. *Musically*, the music used in evangelical worship is practically indistinguishable from its contemporary, secular counterparts; its singular aspect defining it as ‘gospel’ is its *linguistic* component.³⁰

The discourse of fundamentalism is severely limited by its failure fully to engage the human, by its truncation of the mystery of what it is to be human.

The danger of all three lies within their inability fully to engage the present context. The traditionalists by appearing “to hope that it can simply avoid the question of cultural dissatisfaction” (romanticism?), the “Evangelical” by placing so much of its *raison d’être* against modernity while simultaneously borrowing from it in an uncritical way (lack of integrity?) and “Mainline Protestantism” by assuming “the modern condition as a given and ...then attempt(ing) to analyse our condition so as to locate within it signs of divine presence”³¹ (flattening the transformative power of the Gospel?).

Hughes argues for a liturgical theology that begins in the place of mystery, in order to embrace a dialogue with the contemporary context of our personal lives and the society around us. “Liturgical meaning is effected at the extremity of what we can manage or comprehend as human beings. Worship is a journey “to the edge of chaos.” It is something liminal, standing on the borderline of finitude and the infinite. It is both the terror and the ecstasy of coming to the edge of ourselves.”³²

According to Hughes, the way forward is by embracing the limit experiences of our lives, naming them and reflecting them; by claiming a post-critical “second naiveté”³³; and by intensifying ordinariness. Hughes’ book, *Worship as Meaning*, is a masterful philosophical study of the function of “meaning” in liturgy. However, its weakness is that it only points the way rather than fully developing what he proposes. However, I think that the three dangerous tendencies he illuminates in their “traditionalist”-Evangelical-Mainline incarnations, as well as the three “ways forward” are helpful. Of all three of Hughes’ suggestions, it is the first that gives me pause for reflection. To embrace the “limit experiences of our lives” is to walk boldly into the places of wonder, grief, loss, suffering, confusion, and beauty that mark the cross and resurrection in our lives. But it also speaks to me of the act of being broken open to embrace other limits: the “other” in our midst and in our world. It is a conversation both “catholic” and “of the cross,” or “evangelical.”

Mutual conversation with otherness around us is a responsibility of the church’s catholicity. We speak of baptism as the incorporation

one into another in Christ. We speak of the eucharist as the meal that feeds us in God's activity in the world, the catholic – whole world – stretch of God's arms. Making space for the "other" is the catholic personality of the new creation. The grafting into Christ of my own self and its anthropological givens is "enriched by otherness, a personality which is what it is only because multiple others have been reflected in it in a particular way.... The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: 'you are not only you; others belong to you too.'"³⁴ The dynamism of gathering and dispersing that we see in the *Didache* forms Christian belonging:

Christian belonging is always dynamic; it is open to God's transformative action. The eschatological nature of Christian faith frees Christians from all forms of narrow definitions of identity and forms of cozy or neurotic belonging to their tradition. They do not need to be afraid to meet their own otherness or the otherness of others, for their ultimate project is not to stabilize their own selves but to belong to God and one another in Christ and prepare themselves for God's transformative actions in all of their life as well as the entire universe.³⁵

What would it be like for us to reclaim the radical eschatology of the early Christian community described by the *Didache*? To truly see the eucharist as not only constitutive of us ("the eucharist makes the church") *and* not belonging to us ("the church *makes* the eucharist"),³⁶ as entrusted to our stewardship for the sake of the world? How might that shape our reflections on belonging, on communion?³⁷

Openness to Otherness

One of the most powerful short books authored by Rowan Williams just prior to his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury is *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*. In it he explores virtues in danger of being lost to North Atlantic cultures. In an article on "Remorse" he explores themes of sin and the self and the "other" and our capacity to deal honourably with our personal and collective histories. At stake is our capacity for real relationship across multiple differences, and ultimately our relationship with God. Remorse is not simple guilt, nor sorrow, but a deeper engagement of the self and soul in recognizing and acting on the relational complexities of suffering and sin. It is "the question of whether we are still capable of seeing

failure or betrayal as inner and personal wounds, injuries to a person's substance."³⁸ At the heart of it is the admission that our personal "substances" are not things that we have created ourselves. We are products of culture and anthropological realities, relationship and accumulations of accidents and actions beyond ourselves. One of the myths of modernity may well be that we are in control, that we are autonomous functioning conjunctions of things that can be understood, even by ourselves. This is true only to a certain, very limited extent. My past does not belong exclusively to me. "My actions have had effects and meanings I never foresaw or intended; even the meanings I *did* intend have now become involved with the speech and the story of other lives."³⁹

Remorse is a way in to the tricky conversation about how we deal with the sins of the past that we can only now judge as sin, which have warped relationships between peoples. Williams' work is very helpful in thinking about our relationship with "otherness" on several levels. One is the relationship to the other, with who my self is bound; the other is my own relationship to my self through history, which is then seen to be intimately relational.

[T]o acknowledge the past, the past in which I am enmeshed with countless others and which I cannot alter by my will, is entirely and unavoidably a risk, an exposure of vulnerability. When it meets hostility, refusal to understand or inability to understand, it has no sure solutions; the new conflict that may be generated will increase the sense of helpless involvement in the lives and agendas of others. Remorse, in other words, doesn't bring history to a standstill. What it offers is something quite other, and not by any means so attractive: the possibility of *thinking* history, living consciously in time. Refusing remorse is refusing to think what it is to be a subject changing according to processes and interactions outside my will: to take refuge in the mythology of the invulnerable core of free selfhood, always equipped to construct a desired identity, is effectively to say that the roots of my identity are not in time.⁴⁰

In the Canadian context today, the experience of "limit" and "otherness" in relation to our own colonial past and our present relationships with Indigenous peoples can be well informed by Williams' observations. The true catholic embrace of Gospel care for the other demands of us a listening to the marginalized, an embrace of their limit experiences, only as we who listen are able to do. This path has been embraced by the Anglican Church of Canada⁴¹ for over

a decade, and the church's experience has been one of learning, not the least of which has been and continues to be in lessons on how to listen. This is not a matter of entering into someone else's pain, as in taking on as my own pain that of one abused within the residential school system. True remorseful listening that is fully present to and honouring the one who is speaking avoids sentimental melancholy of identification.⁴² Williams describes the insights of philosopher Gillian Rose.

When Rose describes the two obvious reactions to the Auschwitz exhibitions – identification with the sufferers on the one hand and tortured self-examination on the other – she is describing two kinds of imaginative heroism: the leap of self-abnegating compassion into the abyss of the Other's suffering, and the descent into the dramas of my own will, bravely testing and facing its frailty. She invites us to look away from both, and to see ourselves neither as victims nor as performers or perpetrators, but as supplicants, and as significantly deceived (and self-deceived) participants in a process that is distorting and impoverishing us.⁴³

Herein lies one of the greatest challenges in communicating – whether through preaching or any other voice in the church – to church and society what our response ought to be to the legacies of abuse in the schools, and the abusive system of the schools to generations of Indigenous peoples, and dealing with the church's complicity and activity in that system. There exist temptations both to identify with victims, beyond a healthy compassion, and, what I wish to say more sharply than does Williams, the tendency to close off from the story out of paralyzing guilt (or the fear that others are trying to push guilt on me, and want something more than I can or want to give of them) both of which lead to a premature closure of conversation. "I'm not personally guilty for things done in the name of my community years ago!" is one defensive response. This needs to be countered by a careful reminder of who we are in Christ, our being bound in *koinonia* across time as well as space. Language of guilt – in terms of personal culpability – does not fit into the grammar of what is going on here. Neither does identification with victims. The language of remorse draws us more helpfully into the complexities of history, and more respectfully into the "otherness" of the victim.

There is no hope without remorse – the return to the victim, the acknowledgement of what is beyond mending or recompense, the

proffering of one's own pain and unfreedom not as a weapon but as a gateway into talking together (into charity?); the alternatives are ... hatred or amnesia. But acknowledgement and the will to charity can guarantee nothing. Remorse is not automatically a lever to change things, least of all the past.⁴⁴

What it is, is the beginning of the possibility of a mutual conversation. As mutual, it is not the competitive conversation of people of dominant and oppressed culture each of whom see each other as competitors for claims on victimhood:

...the relation between oppressor/aggressor and victim, in a context where remorse is not properly available, leaves *both* in a strikingly similar position. There is a competition for moral security, for the ability to bear your own scrutiny with confidence...two kinds of timeless identity; two selves attempting to stand outside language and difficulty.⁴⁵

From the point of view of one in the dominant culture, the language of remorse allows me to admit the vulnerability and “strength-in-weakness” that allows me to sit and listen – as a supplicant, to use Rose’s language. Williams is careful to caution that the paying of what is due, in terms of recompense, say in land claims or financial compensation, cannot be seen to be the end in and of itself. Anglican justice commitments have made this argument from the beginning: that we cannot go back to some imagined pure time, but only forward in justice, which will only come through the fuller participation and enabling-towards-participation of Indigenous people in civil life and in the life of the Church. Difficult as it seems at the time, the payment of compensation, and then leaving things there (as in: “I’ve paid what is due, now let’s get on with ‘normal’”) is an easy way *out* of the Gospel imperatives of the catholic personality in embracing the wronged other in whose suffering I am implicated. The long-haul church-becoming-church work can be no less than that which comes from a grace-guided process of remorse: that we go through the fire that has us reacquaint ourselves with our histories through others’ eyes, that we not refuse the claim of the other on us:

...remorse has to do with finding the self in the other; refusing remorse amounts to defining ‘real’ selfhood out of both time and conversation. And such refusal stops me understanding that what I now am has been *made*...it is the deposit of choices, accidents and

risks. If I am not capable of understanding this, I shall see myself as a bundle of 'natural' phenomena – instincts, desires, affinities – not open to critique, not capable of being thought through or articulated in recognizable speech. In political terms, this is the seedbed of fascism and violent xenophobia.⁴⁶

In time – and I emphasise that the time cannot be mine! – the goal must be a walking together and conversing together. “What is ‘due’ to the victim is the freedom to share in the definition of who and what they are, to participate in the exchange of conversational presence.”⁴⁷

Harkening back to earlier comments about the relationship between theological language and the language of prayer, the language of remorse is that of the prayerful *suppliant*. It is purgative, laying bare all kinds of clutter and getting back to the soul of things. It is the language of the cross.

To admit failure before God is for speech to show the judgement of God – or rather, exposure to the judgement of God – in the simplest of ways... Religious discourse must articulate and confront its own temptations, its own falsehoods. It is ... essential to theology that theologians become aware of how theology has worked and continues to work in the interests of this or that system of power.⁴⁸

Our response to the cross, if we keep it at the heart of things, can serve as that corrective which keeps us from ideological triumphalism in our theological discourse. If our theological language is to be kept honest, it must begin in humility and be oriented primarily *to* God in self-surrendering, responsive *kenosis*. Only in this way will it avoid the temptation to foreclose on mystery and on conversation. To Williams, the integrity of theological speech – including that of preaching – resides in its openness to conversation, its refusal to “foreclose (on) the possibility of a genuine response.”⁴⁹ The commitment inherent in this has implications at once deeply spiritual and broadly political as well as ecclesial. “Having integrity... is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers.”⁵⁰ A theology oriented by the rhythms and language and self-offering of prayer presumes a discourse of vulnerability. It knows itself not to be the final word, and shows its needs for collaborative discourse and common life by its own vulnerability and openness:

It does not seek to prescribe the tone, the direction, or even the vocabulary of a response. And it does all this by showing in its own working a critical self-perception, displaying the axioms to which it

believes itself accountable; that is to say, it makes it clear that it accepts, even within its own terms of reference, that there are ways in which it may be questioned and criticized.⁵¹

The Blessed Vulnerability of Preaching

Preaching as a public discourse will always be open (whether it intends to be or not!) to criticism. Would best that it be open to mutual conversation! I say “public discourse” because preaching is a public function. It may seem to be private, in the sense that it is something that happens for the most part within the church gathered, not out on the street corner. However, we need to ask: what is the church, and can we tolerate a notion of “private” corporate worship? No, the public worship of the church is precisely that. Second, preaching is “public” because it engages the space between mystery and the present context. The best way to do this is neither to fall into the romanticism described by Hughes as both “traditionalism” and “fundamentalism,” but to engage reality, with the kind of passion exhibited by a Bonhoeffer. Discernment “of the presence, form and call of Jesus Christ in the world is (for Bonhoeffer) ... a love affair with life in all its fullness and reality.”⁵²

In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other. The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world, and when I encounter the reality of the world it is already sustained, accepted and reconciled in the reality of God. [the purpose of Christian life] is, therefore, participation in the reality of God and of the world in Jesus Christ today, and this participation must be such that I never experience that reality of God without the reality of the world, or the reality of the world without the reality of God.⁵³

Such realism in regarding the world makes claims upon us. The first is that in order to say any word about the world, we must know it. In order to have integrity in our interpretation of the world by the light of the Gospel, we need to know that of which we speak. We must be careful not to repeat patterns of oppression that do not allow others outside of ourselves to speak for themselves, including “the world” or “the other.” Hence at least three challenges for the preacher: the challenge to engagement itself, and the challenge to the vulnerability of *not* speaking. Silence being a friend to discernment

(how else do we listen?), the only way toward preaching with integrity about the Gospel in our context is to know your world with as much passion as you live the Gospel. There are then, according to Williams two paradoxes about this engagement. One is that “the struggle for Christian integrity in preaching leads us close to those who least tolerate some aspects of that preaching.”⁵⁴ The other is that in naming the presence of sin and grace in the world, we are saying something about the church.

[T]he interpretation of the world ‘within the scriptural framework’ is intrinsic to the *Church’s* critical self-discovery. In judging the world, by its confrontation of the world with its own dramatic script, the Church also judges itself: in attempting to show the world a critical truth, it shows itself to itself as Church also. All of which means that we are dealing not with the ‘insertion’ of definable blocks of material into a well-mapped territory where homes may be found for them, but with *events* of re-telling or re-working traditional narrative patterns in specific human interactions; an activity in which the Christian community is itself enlarged in understanding and even in some sense evangelized. Its integrity is bound up in encounters of this kind, and so in the unavoidable elements of exploratory fluidity and provisionality that enter into these encounters. At any point in its history, the Church needs both the confidence that it has a gospel to preach, and the ability to see that it cannot readily specify in advance how it will find words for preaching in particular new circumstances.⁵⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer used the metaphor of the *cantus firmus* and counterpoint to describe the act of discernment. The *cantus firmus* represents God’s voice, which we are called to discern from within the music and noises around us.⁵⁶ Discernment – that work of interpreting life in light of the Gospel, naming there the grace and sin that the Gospel illumines – is the foundational work of preaching. Its ground is honesty in self-knowledge – knowing who I am (which is only known in relation to others) and called to be in conformity to the crucified God.

We can know preaching as a place of great vulnerability – if we take seriously what it means to be the gathering-dispersed church called to honest engagement in the life of the world. But vulnerability and communion are two parts of the same gift. Recall that the language of communion first used in describing the life of the Trinity had to do with mutual inhabiting. This refers both to our being-as-

church, the baptised who are called into life with each other, and our being-as-church-in-the-world.

What do I need, as one part of the preaching community, from preaching in today's Canadian context? I need a voice that reminds our whole community of who we are, of the "limit experience" of being church, that we do not own the Gospel but that it owns us and breaks us open to each other and the world in one single movement. This is a voice that knows that preaching is *liturgical preaching* – one part of the pattern of gathering and dispersal that serves God's reconciling mission in the world. I need a voice that is unafraid of the journey of remorse, and that can help us all to return to the centre where bath, Word and meal are continually reforming us. I need a voice that can allow others' voices to be heard, even to the point of risking the vulnerability of the preacher's own voice. I need a voice that is engaged with my own, that can bend itself into mutual conversation without fear of vulnerability. Concretely, I need a voice that commits to a conversation that will help me in the conversation I need to have with others. It won't just "model" how to be with others, but actually engage me in it, teaching me how to listen to gay, lesbian and transgendered people, to Indigenous peoples, not to embrace their exclusion as my own (romanticism), nor to participate in the continued oppressive naming of their realities for them, but allowing them the right of mutual conversation. It will thereby help me better to know myself – and thusly gifted, I can better take up my responsibility in the mutual conversation of the preaching community, both in relation to my pastor/preacher/priest and my own baptismal ministry. If we are indeed "born to mutual conversation" as Melancthon and a host of modern anthropologists tell us, how much more are we gifted by grace in taking up the call to *engage* in mutual conversation.

Notes

- 1 "Wir sind zum wechselseitigen Gespräch geboren," was printed by the German government on a 2-mark coin struck to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Melancthon's birth in 1997. See Gordon Lathrop and Timothy Wengert, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 141.
- 2 I use the word *laos* to refer to the whole body of the baptised, including

both laity and clergy who together share the ministry and mission of living the kingdom to and in the world.

- 3 Following a series of disclosures of abuse during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), and in the wake of the Recommendations of RCAP, the Anglican Church of Canada, along with the three other mission churches who were involved in the Indian Residential Schools, began to listen to the stories of former students. Eventually thousands of lawsuits were launched against the Federal Government of Canada. A lesser number were also directed against the churches, while the Federal Government launched an overwhelming number of ‘third party’ suits against the churches. The effects (mainly legal fees) have been financially crippling to several Anglican dioceses and to the national structure, while denominational leaders have consistently voiced the need for justice, listening and reparations to be paid to victims. In March of 2003, the Federal Government and the Anglican Church of Canada reached an agreement to settle the disputes between these two parties (Government and Church), effectively ending Federal implication of Anglican church structures in lawsuits, and binding the Anglican Church of Canada to contribute \$25 million over five years to a fund to be used solely for payment of reparation funds to victims. All parishes across the country are to some extent involved in fund-raising towards this “Settlement Fund.”
- 4 John Donne, “Holy Sonnet XVIII” in Frank Warnke, ed. *John Donne: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 275.
- 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SSCM, 1971), p. 300.
- 6 Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 9ff.
- 7 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 7.
- 8 See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People*, p. 102.
- 9 See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People*, pp. 103ff.
- 10 Gordon Lathrop argues that “*lex supplicandi*” actually precedes, takes priority over “*lex orandi*” See Ibid. I would prefer not to make the linear distinction, but see them bound up in one another.
- 11 In the Eastern rite traditions, the religious icon painting functions in a sacramental way: highly symbolic, but one is invited into the prayer begun by the icon painter, not merely to stand as an observer.
- 12 Dirk Lange, “The *Didache*: Liturgy Redefining Life,” in *Worship* 78:3 (May 2004): 203-225,212.

- 13 I am relying on Lange's interpretation of such scholars as Kurt Niderwimmer and Enrico Mazza.
- 14 Lange argues, following other commentators, that it took several generations before the Eucharistic wine took on the principal symbol of the blood of Christ.
- 15 Lange: 220-221.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid, 209. To Lange, the *Didache* texts embody juxtaposition in the classic sense as the juxtaposition is evident in the structure of the text – teaching (chapters 1-6), baptism (chapter 7), teaching discipline (fasting, chapter 8), eucharist (chapters 9-10), welcome (chapters 11-13), eucharist (chapter 14), eschatological welcome (chapters 15-16).
- 18 Ibid., p. 209.
- 19 Ibid., p. 221.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), pp. 94ff.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Language borrowed from William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996).
- 24 Farley, pp. 94-95.
- 25 Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 113.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Lathrop in Lathrop and Wengert, pp. 137-138.
- 28 Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), p. 225.
- 29 Hughes, p. 252.
- 30 Hughes, p. 244.
- 31 See Hughes, p. 253. The parenthetical remarks are my own.
- 32 Hughes, p. 257.
- 33 Hughes is employing the concepts of Paul Ricoeur. See especially *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) and "Original Sin: a study in meaning" in *Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1974).
- 34 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 51.

- 35 Werner G. Jeanrond in Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), p. 118.
- 36 Leading up to the Second Vatican Council, French Roman Catholic theologian Yves Congar, among others, was famous for his ecclesiological reflections deriving from the paradoxical statement: “The eucharist makes the church and the church makes the eucharist.”
- 37 One of the more sensible responses to disagreements in the Anglican Communion worldwide has been the commissioning of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, along with others, to reflect on the meaning of “communion” within the Anglican Communion: what does it mean to “belong” to this body that is a communion of autonomous churches? What are the limits of communion? To take Lange’s reading of the *Didache* seriously might lead one to ask questions about the long-perceived notion in ecumenical and Anglican circles that “full communion” is a realizable, liveable reality. Lange’s interpretation pushes us to radicalize this notion of “full communion” and, while not detracting from celebrated mutual recognition of churches, might, I believe, help us to ground ecclesiological conversations in a deeper and broader sense of the original missiological constitution of the church.
- 38 Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 97.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 41 The Roman Catholic Church in Canada, the United Church of Canada and the Presbyterian Church in Canada were the four main missionary churches who with the Federal Government of Canada ran the Indian Residential Schools. I limit my reflections to my experience within the Anglican Church of Canada.
- 42 “... remorse occurs when there is a sense of the *implication* of my self with the other (the other person, the wider moral or material environment), such that another’s loss becomes – not the *same* as mine, but the cause of loss to me, specific, historical loss. If we simply said that someone else’s loss ‘became’ mine, we should be abolishing the distance between me and the other; recognition in the other would collapse into absorption, and we should be left only with melancholy, in which all pain or tragedy is defined in terms of *my* sense of a loss of power or value.” *Lost Icons*, pp. 129-130.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 124. See also Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 33-36.

- 44 Ibid., p. 109.
- 45 Ibid., p. 117.
- 46 Ibid., p. 111.
- 47 Ibid., p. 115.
- 48 Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 8.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid., p. 5.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Lisa Dahill, "Probing the Will of God: Bonhoeffer and Discernment," in *Dialog* 41:1 (Spring, 2000): 42-49,46.
- 53 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1955), p. 193.
- 54 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 39.
- 55 Ibid., p. 31.
- 56 See especially E. Bethge, ed., *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), p. 303. "God wants us to love God eternally with our whole hearts – not in just a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint ... where the cantus firmus is clear and plan, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits."