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Becoming A New Creation: Principles For Liturgy¹

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Liturgy acts like glue to hold Christian denominations intact. Christians express their faith through the liturgies of their denominations. Each denomination has its own pattern for liturgy, and within that liturgy, one can see expressions of the denominational ethos and values. One can learn certain things about the theologies and beliefs that the denomination (or writer of the liturgy) holds.

As we move toward the twenty first century it is worth asking ourselves, "What values do we want to express in our liturgies? What is it that we as Christian churches want to say about faith as we enter a new millennium?"

I want to name eight theological principles which I hope are the basis for being church as we head into the next century, and to examine some of the implications of those principles for liturgy.

The first principle for a vital church is mission. We are the church in order to serve the world. God acts in the world. God loves the world. We gather as church in order to be strengthened, empowered and renewed as the people of God to be God's hands and feet in the world. The church is not for itself and will implode if we focus on ourselves instead of Christ's call to justice in the world. Correct doctrine is not as important as ethical practices for justice and well-being in the world.

There are a number of implications of this principle for worship. To begin with, we require clarity about the needs of the world. Christians must be able to hear the news of the world, analyze social structures and distinguish what actions would offer good news in concrete terms. Liturgy cannot be so Word centred that we forget action.

As well, if our liturgies embody mission, they will create vision. Liturgies will engage us in the prophetic action of imagining a new society based in the social needs of our day. They will allow us to believe and act into a new way of being. For example, if we believe that women and children have lived with less economic, social and political privilege than men in the world, our liturgies will model gender justice and model honouring of children. Women and children will offer leadership in liturgy. Children will be viewed as full and respected members of the church now, not simply as the future of the church.

A mission focus also invites us toward global justice. While the history of imperialism is not at all glorious and the church has damaged indigenous cultures, the church's presence can call us to more equitable sharing of the world's resources and to ending violence. Liturgy that focusses on mission allows church people to know what is happening to comfort women in the Philippines, textile workers in Hong Kong, and displaced people in refugee camps. Justice oriented liturgies impel us as church to speak to governments and corporations about the implications of their work in perpetuating violence and unjust structures where that is happening. It pushes us as Christian people to work together for common causes for well-being in the world.

A second principle for a church moving toward the new century is construction of community. Society often exhibits individualism. Yet many people experience loss of place, of belonging, of accountability to others. All of us need community, places where respect and care draw out the deep longings of our hearts and allow us to be fully human. Ideally Christian communities allow us to know ourselves as beloved—beloved of God and loved by the people of God.

The implications for liturgy of this principle begin with making churches welcoming places. Greeters and ushers who assist people; attentiveness to strangers who may not know the in-words, codes and customs; offering of physical comfort; and creating access for people with disabilities are all ways to welcome people. Churches can provide space for people to be known through connecting worship and pastoral care, connecting people to others with similar concerns/experiences/life crises. Liturgies themselves can connect us

to other humans in care and in accountability. Liturgies give opportunity for us to be integrated into common standards of mutuality and respect. They can model solidarity and offer accompaniment for us in our times of challenge and despair as well as in our times of joy.

Our prayers and music display our theologies. Do they reveal individualistic approaches to faith? Or do they remind us that the church is the gathered community of God's people?

A third principle is inclusion of diversity. I come from the United Church of Canada, a liberal church. Liberalism values homogeneity; it wants to believe we all have equal opportunity in life or for salvation. But we do not. A theology of diversity stresses that we are all created in the image of God, that we are inter-related and responsible for making sure everyone has a place in the circle.

Taking a theology of diversity seriously in the liturgy means asking who pays the cost and who benefits. It means asking who is the norm. Many mainline churches have tended to say white middle class people are the norm and have addressed themselves primarily to that group. What if the norm were people who use wheel chairs and scooters to assist with mobility? Access to buildings, choir "lofts" and pulpits would change in many churches. When we sit and how and where we move would be considered first from the perspective of people with mobility impairments.

As well a theology of diversity means that, "them" becomes "us". We would say in our liturgies, "those of us who live with disabilities...who are black, Asian, aboriginal...those of us who are children, youth, elderly..." We pray differently when we say, "Let us pray for those of us who live with mental illness, let us pray for those of us who are gay and lesbian, let us pray for those of us who are poor" instead of praying that God be with "them" and help "them" as if no one in our congregations is mentally ill, gay or poor.

A variety of images of God would necessarily be used. Many churches have begun to ask about the damage done when we see God only as Father or in other masculine terms. We have a long way to go before we take human diversity seriously in our choosing of appropriate and inclusive language and images for God. The turbulence of the issue of inclusive language related to women and femi-

nine manifestations of God has raised furor in many churches—but we have barely begun the long and needed process toward true diversity in our language about either humanity or God.

A fourth principle is participation. All people affected by decisions should participate in the decisions that will affect their lives. All need opportunity to join in the naming and the shaping of the common good. Salvation is sometimes described as wholeness. The Oxford Dictionary says the term derives from the Latin and means safe. So in traditional terms, no one is saved alone. No one is safe until all are safe. All must participate in the decisions affecting our safety, our common good, our salvation.

For liturgy, implications of a theology of participation means, in the first place, participation by all in the shaping of the liturgy. For example, the United Church of Canada, especially its Committee on Liturgy, has bought eagerly into the ecumenical convergence on liturgy growing out of Vatican II and the World Council of Churches. The ecumenical convergence names participation as a value, but expresses that participation liturgically through form. Liturgies are written so that everyone can read/say their part. This may work in churches accustomed to having prayer books and set liturgies. In the reformed churches that have followed the pattern of directories outlining the order of service with the minister putting in the content, nothing has changed. The minister still has all the control. She or he writes what the people will say. So while the sound of the liturgy may be different than if only the minister speaks, it is far from participatory. Unless people name their theological concerns and shape the liturgies of the church on an on-going basis, liturgies do not embody the common good, safety, salvation.

Besides shared planning and ownership, participation requires shared leadership. For example, the United Church tends to read a lengthy portion of the passion narrative on Passion Sunday or on Good Friday. Because of the length of the scripture selections, many churches use a narrator and different voices for the different characters speaking in the passage. The crunch comes when we ask, “Who plays Jesus in the Good Friday drama?” What does it say if a white-skinned, blond-haired person plays Jesus? What does it say if a black person takes that role? Or a Palestinian Christian? Visible leadership of women, people of colour, aboriginal people, gay and lesbian min-

isters, leaders whose bodies do not meet the North American standards in terms of ability to function freely will change the church. Who will play Jesus in the Good Friday drama?

Full participation requires a basic environment of safety. Churches have not always been safe places for women who are living with violent men nor for people who are abuse survivors. Liturgies that name with clarity the evil of violence and of abuse and that hold abusers accountable for their behaviour are prerequisites for safety for those who have lived without safety in their lives. Liturgies of lament are needed.

Truth-telling is the fifth theological principle. The truth-telling of which I speak is far from the imperialistic truth-imposing that has dominated much of Christian history.

I believe that truth is socially constructed, or to use the well-known Pauline phrase, "We see in a mirror dimly." We do not know all the truth. We always need to ask, "Whose truth?" since truth is normally named by those who hold social and political power. Thus the truth-telling to which I refer is the truth-telling from subjugated knowledge and dangerous memories. It is the truth known by those who have not had power in society and who have not been invited to share their insights. When we only hear the version of truth given by those with power, the mirror is very dim. The stories of the powerless must be part of our construction of the truth.

For those who have lived without power and without voice, telling the truth about life is not easy. This year I did a research project on women and loss. A very high proportion of the women in the study had been silenced and trivialized in their losses. No one acknowledged and validated their losses. If the loss was through death, the church provided a funeral ritual but no rituals were offered for miscarriages, ends of relationships, losses of health, losses of homes, losses through moves, or experiences of violation. We need a variety of liturgies and rituals for times of loss. We need permission and skill to create the rituals we need that tell the truth about our lives, that acknowledge and validate what has happened. This means personal and small group rituals will have as large a place in the life of the church as does the Sunday liturgy. It means rituals will grow out of our encounters with God in ordinary life and into theology rather than starting with theology to create rituals and frameworks for life.

Truth will be found and experienced in ritual and story.

First Nations people have begun truth-telling about residential schools. It is a challenge for a dominantly white church to face our complicity in cultural genocide of First Nations people of Canada. Liturgically we are required to acknowledge our sin, to engage in repentance, and to commit ourselves to actions for justice. Silence and humility in the presence of our accusers rather than prematurely asking for forgiveness is necessary.

The sixth theological principle for the church in this era is survival. Poet Audre Lorde and ethicist Eleanor Haney both place high value on survival. Lorde suggests that the survival of black women in America is amazing; no one meant for them to survive.² Haney adds:

In my Christian tradition, survival has not been regarded as a principle of moral action; it has been seen as selfish and/or cowardly. But as I become more and more aware of the ways in which I and others have learned to survive in an unjust world, I am impressed by the necessity and creativity of survival...Surviving is a necessary and important principle. We should live. Our lives are intrinsically important, and we exist in networks of those with whom and for whom we are responsible.³

The biblical stories of the temptation of Jesus include the temptation for Jesus to jump from the temple roof so people could see the angels rescue him. We are as tempted as Jesus was to seek an external rescuer rather than to see ourselves as responsible for the survival of the world. No one will rescue us from the insanity of violence that pervades this world nor from the environmental disasters we are creating by our daily living. We need to come to our senses and realize that survival is a moral and theological principle essential to life.

Liturgies that model options for peace, wholeness, and justice are needed if survival becomes central to our theology. Mark Searle notes that, "Celebrating the liturgy should train us to recognize justice and injustice when we see it. It serves as a basis for social criticism by giving us a criterion by which to evaluate the events and structures of the world."⁴

It is no small matter to consider making survival a norm in liturgy.

Christologies (our understanding of Jesus' meaning for humanity) will shift. There will be less focus on servanthood, selfless giving, and atonement. Theologies will emphasize creation and the life and resurrection of Jesus more than the fall and death of Jesus. There will be more focus on accountability, a mission of justice in the world, and courage. Sanctuary, that is, the creation of safe places to gather for nurturing and to strategize for actions of survival, will focus the liturgy.

The seventh principle is compassion. Compassion is the capacity of persons to be present to another and to work tenaciously for one another's well-being. I believe we come to compassion through truth-telling/truth-hearing, through a stance of witness and advocacy, and through actions of solidarity and empowerment toward justice.

Implications of compassion for liturgy are many. First, we need silence in our liturgies. We need to listen to the Spirit and each other. Protestant prayers have tended to be monologues directed at God with little opportunity for God to be anything but silent. It is our turn to be silent now.

Secondly, announcements are central to liturgy. Many people get frustrated that the announcements take too long, and contend that people have come to worship not to listen to announcements. Liturgies of compassion stress the announcements as indication of and invitation to the work of the people of God in the world. They are as much worship as is the sermon or music.

Thirdly, liturgies need to engage us more fully so that we will take their power with us into the world. The liturgy needs to embody the gospel and invite us to use our heads, our hearts, our senses, our bodies, our feelings. If the gospel permeates at every level of our being we may be transformed to go into the world empowered by the Holy Spirit to act justly and offer compassion to our broken world. Liturgies will invite us to wail or dance, to lament and praise, to analyze and to envision, to move and to be still.

A final principle needed as we develop liturgies for the new millennium rests in creation of healthy self-esteem. We need to understand in every fibre of our being that we are made in the image of God and loved by God. Divine acceptance, the knowledge of

God's grace infusing our beings, allows us to acknowledge systemic evil beyond personal neuroses and to act with the power of the Spirit to transform the world. Our children live with many messages telling them that they are not acceptable. Our daughters hear that their bodies are not perfect; our sons hear that they are to be harsh to succeed. Children (and adults) need strong self-esteem and assurance that they are beloved by their very existence.

A primary implication of this principle of creating strong self-esteem is to move from liturgies focussing on sin to liturgies focussing on being God's beloved. While repentance for sin is an appropriate Christian discipline, to focus our energy on confession disempowers us and consumes energy we need for positive action in the world.

Moreover, to be made in the image of God and to believe that all other human beings are also made in that same image of God allows us to act from a position of love rather than a position of shame. Shame breeds fear and lets us focus only on ourselves. Healthy self-esteem empowers us to be fully present to others and to consider their well-being. It allows us to name our own needs and to be self-respecting people while taking seriously the needs of others and the common good of the community. Strong self-esteem grants us the capacity to be humble since we do not need to exert power over others, nor to demand that others submit to us. Liturgies for self-esteem show the reality of a compassionate and liberating God who calls us forth to a new life of justice, mutuality, well-being, peace and promise. Liturgies for strong self-esteem remind us that we can love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbours as ourselves. Liturgies for healthy self-esteem make us believe that love is an option.

In summary, the principle of mission in liturgy means focussing on actions to meet concrete needs of the world's people, catching visions of the new creation, and lifting up the call to global justice. The principle of construction of community requires that churches be welcoming places, and that liturgies not promote individualism through music and prayers. Diversity insists that we ask who constitutes the norm in our liturgies, that our language shift from "them" to "us" and that our images of God expand. A principle of participation means liturgies are shaped out of the concerns of the people, that leadership is shared, and that safety is provided for those who

have experienced violation. Truth-telling gives ritual validation to the experiences of those who have been marginalized and pushes us to acknowledge the sins of the church. A principle of survival asserts that liturgies can be models for peace, wholeness and justice, and invites us to re-examine our christologies. Compassion urges us to silence in order to hear the voice of God, upholds that the work of Christian people in the world is of the essence of worship, and reminds us that our worship involves us as whole people. The spiritual principle of healthy self-esteem contends that we need less emphasis on sin and more on being beloved and that love is always an option.

These eight principles of Christian faith and practice offer hope as we head to a new millennium. Moving to live out these principles in our liturgies will not be easy, especially in a time when mainline churches are no longer expanding. We tend to try to maintain ourselves by conserving and holding on to what has worked in times of expansion. But the gospel always calls the church outward instead of inward. The gospel calls us to feel the Spirit tugging at our reluctant coat tails, to new hearing of scripture, to act our way into the new creation which God desires for this world. Liturgies can lead us toward the new century with hope.

Notes

- ¹ This article is based on a talk given at the Canadian Theological Society in June 1997 as part of a panel, "Theological Issues Facing the Practice of Liturgy in Canada" with Mary Schaefer, Frank Henderson, Mac Watts, David Oliver.
- ² "The idea that happiness can insulate us against the results of our environment is a rumour circulated by our enemies to destroy us. And what Woman of Colour in America over the age of 15 does not live with the knowledge that our daily lives are stitched together with violence and with hatred, and to naively ignore that reality can mean destruction" (Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1980, p. 75).
- ³ Eleanor Haney, *Vision and Struggle* (Portland: Astarte Shell Press, 1989) 70, 71.
- ⁴ Mark Searle, "Serving the Lord with Justice" in *Liturgy and Social Justice*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980) 29.