

Table of Contents

Seeds of the Future Church I: The People Who Eat Together and Feed the Poor	1
Seeds of the Future Church II: Outreach	4
Seeds of the Church III: Immaterial Spirituality?	8
Seeds of the Church IV: The Liturgy of Compassion	12
Seeds of the Future Church V: The Wounded, Healing Church	16

Seeds of the Future Church I: The People Who Eat Together and Feed the Poor

February 13, 2024

Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. – Yves Congar.

The last General Convention urged bishops to support liturgical creativity at the local level, thus pushing us into a new chapter in the history of the liturgy in the Episcopal Church precisely at a time when it seems to be shrinking in members and resources. I fear this call for creativity may simply die off with a whimper, out of anxiety over our dwindling numbers of people and resources. This series of articles is a call for change, born of the need for new ideas for the future founded on the core practices of the Christian people. If you are not at least intrigued by the need for change, save yourself the time and stop reading now!

The current crisis forces us to reconsider who we are and what we do through a probing systemic analysis, or we may be condemned to repeating what is obviously not working, again and again until we are no more. Instead, we must deconstruct to reconstruct the church and its worship. In theological terms, we may have to die in order to be the uprising of Jesus Christ in a new way.

Although most of us may prefer to engage this call for creativity decently and in order, don't get your hopes up. The first line in the Bible asserts that for creation to take place, there was first a "*tohu wa-bohu*," an emptiness, voidness, formlessness; and artists remind us that any creative process is messy, involving lots of trial and error, editing, erasing, discarding things and starting all over again. If our creative efforts are going to produce something of quality, *this creation out of chaos cannot be avoided*. And so, the bishops' call for creativity is daunting not only because it comes at a time rife with anxiety, but by its own messy nature.

I have never ever met anyone who admitted to loving indecent and disorderly worship. Not one. *Everyone* thinks *their* liturgical habits and preferences constitute liturgical decency and order, which points to the truth of the old adage, *de gustibus non disputandum est* –there is no arguing about taste. Unfortunately, many a liturgical discussion is plagued by this today. "I like it," and "I don't like it," are often the only reasons given in discussion, never mind scripture, tradition, reason, theology, pastoral insight or ritual anthropology.

Even more daunting is the fact that we live at the tail end of a liturgical revolution begun well before the Second Vatican Council. We who grew up studying the enormous amount of research that went into both may be forgiven for occasionally sounding like we know it all while we continue to insist on full and complete use of symbols and full, conscious and engaged participation by all present. And yet, even those parishes with such healthy liturgy may be experiencing a decline. So change we must, or die as a denomination, –or at best, shrink into a boutique church, with exquisite liturgy celebrated by fifteen parishioners.

Once we get beyond our natural denial of the church's shrinkage and our aversion to indecency and disorder, we can visit our painful situation as an opportunity for transformation with creative joy. This, however, cannot take place without a certain amount of risk-taking and energy for intensive action for rebirth from stuckness. Still, we must not be reactive, nor create change for its own sake or out of adolescent rebelliousness, but, with feet securely planted in tradition we can be open to the gradual or sudden illumination of what is possible.

In this article and the ones following I intend to analyze underlying patterns through deconstruction and meaningful distinctions developing a cohesive understanding of our core as the church and our liturgical practice. This will necessarily bring us into dialogue with historical moments and cultural movements that have brought us to where we are. If nothing else, this may be of some help to those who are motivated or

desperate enough to engage in change while striving always towards excellence.

Certainly a more user-friendly liturgy would be of some help, but that would be a mere band-aid on the wound at a time when about one fourth of Americans simply do not see any reason to be religious at all. This is not simply because we are too liberal or too conservative, but because religion seems utterly absurd to them, individualism runs amok preventing any life in community and they are disinterested in –or unable– to engage in communal symbolic action beyond sports and rock concerts.

Strangely, the challenge before us –to ritually manifest who we are and what we do as a religious community *in ways that make sense to our contemporaries*– does not seem to be on the radar for most liturgical thinkers today. Formed by the status quo, we cannot imagine any other way of being the church. Or we have invested too much love in what we are familiar with. Certainly, we will have to show that unlike evangelicals, we do not take everything literally and consider social justice to be essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only by responding to suffering individuals, but by addressing the systemic causes of illness, suffering and death.

In any case, come what may, cultural liberalism alone will not stanch the bleeding, even if it is delayed by the arrival of formerly evangelical LGBTQ+ converts. We may also need to be healed from an individualistic practice of a liturgy that purveys a feel-good drug to Sunday buyers, for the church is neither a store nor the gospel a drug, and evangelism is much more than advertising.

Whether to redeem the tarnished reputation of Christianity showing that one does not have to be stupid or crazy to be a Christian, or to create new liturgical practices and resources that are both contemporary and orthodox, it will be essential to recover the foundations of who we are as a people. We may have to find the seeds to be sown now so that our dying church may eventually rise again with vigor and integrity.

At its core, the Christian Church is not simply an institution, a creed, a theology, or an architectural style; those came later. From our birth at Easter we have been the gathering (*ekklesia*) of a community, called together by God to hear what God has to say, ferret out its meaning for us individually and as a community, and share a meal of thanksgiving in memory of Jesus to be sent out into the world to heal it. It is *this* church that must be manifested in worship if it is to be considered Christian. This core was already present by the end of the first century, even before our theologies, architecture, vestments and rubrics were fashioned, even before the three orders of bishops, deacons and presbyters were fully developed, at

a time when we were still poor and bishops has not yet been placed on the imperial payroll. This community that revolutionized the Roman Empire even as it crumbled, is the core of the Church –not its totality, of course, but its indispensable, creative nucleus, full of the Spirit: a group of people who eat together and serve the poor. It is here, in the “primitive” church, I suspect, that the dying church will find the seeds for its eventual resurrection.

This call for a return to our sources is not mere romanticism or an example of the fallacy of origins (that anything older is better) but an archeological exercise to get to our foundations; a deconstruction of worship in order to reconstruct it in our own time, place and cultures. In the next articles I will be looking in more detail at diverse elements of this core understanding and practice of the Church and the distractions and temptations that have kept us far from it, causing our possible demise.

Seeds of the Future Church II: Outreach

March 13, 2024

*The task ... is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past. (T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. RKP, 1984, p. xv).*

This is the second article in a series on the shrinking church and the seeds we may sow now to sprout later into a resurrected Christianity. In the previous article I called for us to become aware of the historical core understanding and practice of being the church, not in order to return to the first three centuries –we cannot– but as a step towards approaching the current crisis of the church with a new vision for the future. I concluded that at its essence, the church is the people who eat together and serve the poor in the name of Christ. In this article I attempt to describe one of the earliest challenges we faced: the belief that Christianity is all about having the right, illumined knowledge, often at the expense of mission.

Unfortunately I cannot foretell futures, especially since the number of possible futures is infinite, from the total disappearance of the church to a renewed invigorated resurrection and many graduations in between. What follows, therefore, are some ideas and insights presented for discussion. There may be many other more meaningful, things to say; I hope that if we just keep the conversation going, they may emerge through the exercise of critical imagination in community. I write not to impose but to provoke the reader to join in the conversation with joy and creativity. We can, and

should, erase and redraw this sketch many times as we develop a clearer picture of the seeds of the future church we may want to plant now.

It is tempting to begin our analysis by seeking the causes of our decline, but concentrating on these may lead us instead into yearning for a return to the church of the 1950's. The decline goes back much further. It has been a decline from our origins, driven at first by the reduction of Christian life to only teaching, insights and the right knowledge (gnosis) and more importantly, the divorce between liturgy and mission followed by our collusion with the temporal powers of the state, and the seemingly perpetual abridgement of our liturgical practice. Let us, therefore, begin at the beginning, not to engage in time travel, even though some of us seem perfectly happy to worship pretending to be early nineteenth century Roman Catholics!

Before we had buildings dedicated to worship and a detailed church order for liturgical events, we simply had regular meals together. These meals, termed by St. Paul around 52 AD in First Corinthians as "the Lord's Supper" were the Lord's not because they repeated words of institution from the Last Supper (they were not added until the fourth century, as Andrew McGowan has shown) but because we gathered for a meal in Jesus' memory and honor; a meal characterized by a radical egalitarianism manifested in practice. These "suppers of the Lord" were patterned on the Greco-Roman custom of guilds gathering for meals in honor of their patron gods, and were considered sacrificial worship, that is, worship involving a sacred offering. They likely began with Jesus' own practice following the Jewish custom of rabbis eating with their disciples. They included hungry, landless peasants evicted from their lands by Herod in order to build the new Roman cities of Sepphoris and Ceasarea Phillipi. By late first century, as the Emmaus story indicates, these shared meals were identified with the presence of the Risen Christ, but earlier still, in about 53 AD, Paul had already linked the Risen Christ to his Body, the Church at supper, making Christ's *anastasis* or rising up and the Christian congregation at supper two sides of one coin.

Our meals were worship and mission *in one single event*. By mission I do not mean proselytizing to make more church members, but joining Jesus in his proclamation of the Good News of the nearness of the kingdom. For the mission of the Church *must* be the mission of God in Christ: to rescue, safe keep, heal, save or liberate (all synonyms of *sotería*) all creation from the reign of evil and death. *All the advertising in the world cannot make up for a lack of tangible witness to the nearness of this kingdom*. It is important therefore to be clear about what the "kingdom" (*basileia*) refers to in the New Testament. N.T. Wright puts it succinctly:

“The phrase kingdom of heaven [or of God] is not about a place called heaven, which is somewhere else, where God is king and where we’ll go one day. It is about the establishment of the rule of heaven, in other words, the rule of God here on earth.”¹

This coming rule or reign of God (let’s leave aside the sexist *kingdom*) is exemplified by Jesus’ own practice of proclaiming its nearness through healings, signs, and declaring the free forgiveness of sins without conditions; it does not refer to an individual’s interior state or thoughts and feelings, (“God rules over my heart”) nor to a mysterious, hidden dimension of life, but rather to a *way of living together as a society*. The mission of the church then, is to be a witness *in practice* to the nearness of the healed world that God is pleased to *give* to us. (Lk 12:32).

In the earliest Christian meals, this new society was already present as a sign or evidence of the nearness of God’s reign. Our “Suppers of the Lord” were, as Mark Searle pointed out, the rehearsal of God’s reign. They did not merely *talk* about God’s reign, let alone project it into eternity as a destination after death, but manifested it already here and now, as a tiny seed to be carefully cared for and nurtured. We, however, have come to assume that mission is something secondary to worship, as a local preacher recently claimed, to my astonishment.

Even though at the time the exploration of foreign religions and cults was in vogue throughout the Empire, church growth did not take place through advertising or anything resembling what we today consider “evangelism,” but through our humane service to the poor and suffering, our coming together to eat, and the slowly developing understandings and teachings of what God was up to in Jesus, the Christ. We treated everyone as equals, went to prisons to wash and clothe captives, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and refused to worship the government and its leaders. *Doing* this witness, both at meals and in daily life, *was* mission and evangelism. For this reason the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission adopted as its motto “*Liturgy that does justice that does liturgy,*” for the term *leiturgia* simply meant something done as a service to the people.

Finally, by the early third century, the eucharistic meal of the Reign, scaled down to only bread and wine, gradually lost its connection to the poor and those in need, which became at best, a *result* of worship rather than one of its essential elements. Perhaps in the Neoplatonic climate of the time, aided by a Manichean disdain for matter, denigration of matter and the body was in the air and doing very well indeed, and we were sorely tempted to become a community of special knowledge, never mind the stuff of meals and the very physical hunger of the poor. This emphasis on the “spiritual”

at the cost of the physical would haunt us for centuries, and if I may give away the punch line, betrayed our call as an incarnational religion.

Ironically, just as the eucharist was beginning its long abridgement, another event filled our gatherings with more matter: In 313 AD Constantine legalized Christianity. Some scholars minimize the impact of this upon the church, and its theology, but the sheer amount of physical development that resulted from Constantine's action should give us pause. I suspect that they mean that our core understanding of the *kerygma* was not much altered; perhaps so; but it is difficult to imagine that putting bishops on the imperial payroll and permitting them to judge law cases did not make a difference, or that educated Roman *rhetors* becoming Christian theologians, crowds filling enormous city halls (basilicas) wanting to become Christians and requiring formation was somehow immaterial, or that crowds of suppliants shouting *kyrie eleison* at imperial processions with banners, torches and incense did not affect our worship, which soon enough became an imperial spectacle, this time about Christ instead Zeus. The mere fact that we refused to build pagan-style temples for Christian worship, and chose instead gathering places like basilicas proves my point that something definitely changed in the fourth century even as the earlier commitment to assuage human suffering was echoed in Chrysostom's and Basil's sermons.

In sum, at our beginnings and up to at least the early third century, we gathered for shared meals and served the poor, giving evidence of a new society, the reign of God, as we recovered and acted out our *humanity*.

In the early third century, however, Tertullian mentions that some people were stopping by the church building on Sunday morning on their way to work to pick up some bread and wine leftover from the eucharistic meal of the previous night. At the time, our church buildings were homes or other houses remodeled to serve the needs of the congregation, and may have included provision of not only food, but clothing for the poor as well. There were no basilicas yet, no universal liturgical texts, no vestments, not even a fully fledged Trinitarian theology. Liturgical prayer was mostly extemporaneous, and in good Greco-Roman custom, the meal *preceded* conversation about scripture, hymns and testimony. These eucharistic meals were not liturgy first and outreach later, but liturgy as outreach and outreach as liturgy, inseparable, a single ritual *sign* of the coming Reign of God: a new society as God would have it. This is what we have veered from and occasionally have tried to return to in our long history.

In the next article I will be describing how the spiritualization of otherwise physical actions further emaciated the liturgy, helping

Christianity to become that oxymoron, a “private religion,” prone to escapism and having less and less to do with the practical, material healing of the world.

Seeds of the Church III: Immaterial Spirituality?

March 13, 2024

In the interest of future growth, even resurrection, what seeds of the church must we plant now to germinate later? It seems increasingly futile to keep planting seeds of what is familiar and loved, since it is patently not working. What shall we plant instead? My tentative answer is: *plant the core of our identity as Christians*, –a very small seed, that will sprout into a new church. Besides tending to our natural grief, we can exercise some detachment from what we have grown to love, and let it go in service of what matters most as the church. One way to get to this core is to study our original sources.

In the last article, I explored how the abridgment of the eucharistic meal accelerated the separation of mission from liturgy. At the same time, some came to regard Christianity as yet another spiritual *gnosis* rather than a community giving evidence of the nearness of God’s reign. In this article, I attempt to describe how our “spiritualization” of physical aspects of Christianity further emaciated our liturgy, even driving Christianity to having less and less to do with the concrete, material healing of the suffering world and rehearsing our vision of the reign of God.

Before anyone has a heart attack, let me clarify immediately, –that there *is* such a thing as spirituality. In our tradition, however, the term does not refer to the *mere* fact of our having a spiritual dimension, as in “I am not religious but I’m spiritual.” *Of course* you are. Every human being has a spiritual life, just as we have physical and psychic lives. For many, this spiritual life is shaped by the culture and its markets: it is the spirituality of “whoever dies with the most toys wins,” the spirituality of consumerism, in which human value is reduced to consumption.

In Christianity, however, “spirituality” is often preceded by an adjective: “Benedictine,” Franciscan,” “Jesuit,” etc. The term refers to a *particular* way of understanding and aiding the spiritual development of persons and communities as mature Christians. The Christian concept of

spirituality contains the element of growth and development as we cooperate with the Spirit's work on us.

So, what is all Christian spirituality like? The answer is: *Incarnational*. Christian spirituality cannot do without our bodies and psyches. It is *embodied*, for that is our reality. In humans, the spiritual is distinguishable, yes, but also inseparable from the physical and psychological dimensions. Otherwise, there would have been no need for God to take on human flesh. Worship is embodied precisely because we are bodies, and Christianity is not only a collection of insights and understandings, but a physical ritual *practice* as well. In eucharist, we do not only share ideas. We chew and swallow food as well.

Spiritualization

At the beginning of the last century New Testament scholars coined the phrase “spiritualization of *cultus*” to denote the process of reinterpreting the temple sacrifices, into interior aspects of the heart, moving away from the cultic observances to the tending of interior states, dispositions and virtues. This may have been a natural need among Jews without a Temple, but it quickly affected Christianity as well. Even the “cleansing” of the temple in the gospels is often understood this way. Andrew Mc Gowan gives a clear example:

“E. P. Sanders has pointed out that the traditional idea of “cleansing” the Temple is somewhat alien to the actual story, and has tended to make the event seem like an attack on meaningless ritual in the name of “pure,” spiritual religion.”

McGowan has also suggested that the earliest eucharistic meals *were* considered sacrifices (i.e., sacred offerings) in line with the unbloody sacrifices of the temple such as bread, grains, first fruits, and so on. We did not so much allegorize the temple *sacrifices* to describe interior spiritual attitudes or virtues, but rather continued the practice of bloodless sacrifices, now at meals already considered sacrifices in Greco-Roman cultures. In this sense our earliest eucharists were not “spiritualized” although of course they did profoundly include a spiritual dimension.

However, in 1982 Gustavo Gutiérrez, decried the “spiritualization of religion” into a private spiritual experience, regardless of any existential physical reality, tying it to individualism:

Individualism is the filter that allows us to ‘spiritualize’ and even evaporate what appears in the Bible as solid social and historical affirmations. For example, reducing the opposition poor-rich (a reality external to the individual) to the polarity humble-arrogant

(a reality internal to the individual). This internalizes categories born of realities in which people live and die, struggle and affirm their faith, making them lose their historical bite.”

Gutierrez coined the term in a pejorative way, referring to an alarming phenomenon: that over the centuries in both worship and mission the Christian life increasingly became a matter of only cultivating private, interior “spiritual” awareness, rather than the motor for a concrete, physical style of living in a profoundly alternative society. Rather, the earliest Christian eucharists were physical gatherings born of, and addressing the context in which people lived and died, struggled and affirmed their faith, without making reality lose its “historical bite.”

Since then, our spirituality has gradually become disconnected from physical life, not to mention the realities of a suffering world. The beatitudes came to be understood as pointing to spiritual virtues rather than actually poor, peacemaking, persecuted *bodies*. Taken to its extreme, spiritualization conveniently supports our self-absorption, keeping the embodied social, economic and civic dimensions of the reign of God at arm’s length, or at best, something to be addressed in “outreach” but not within worship. And so our liturgy talks about justice, but seldom enacts it.

By and large, we continue to consider the eucharist an individual event presented on a stage to passive, spectators receiving a message, ignoring its nature as a community’s physical rehearsal of a new society. As an example, only too often our conversations about worship are engaged only in a personal and individual manner: “I like it” or “It moved me,” –or not. Its meaning *to us as a community*, traveling through geography and time, is rarely engaged. And, although it *is possible* to have an experience as a community, our individualism often allows it to pass by unawares as we habitually center our attention on ourselves. This may be a sign of a worshiper’s interest in a dimension beyond themselves, suspecting, perhaps, that there is more to life than shopping, but it may just as well be a form of self-care, a regression in the service of a weak sense of self, as Freud suggested. We have to be careful about “spiritual” experiences. They can be the devil’s work, as Teresa of Avila knew so well.

An incarnational religion like Christianity cannot exist by being only spiritual, let alone by spiritualizing the physical aspects of both worship and its history, which includes its material history as well. At the very least, *Christian spirituality and social justice are inseparable and cannot be dichotomized*. We must not choose between being spiritual and feeding the hungry, nor between theology and the physical aspects of our worship just as we cannot ignore the physical suffering of the world in the name of

spirituality. The Oxford Movement was theologically on target with their emphasis on both physical liturgy and physical social justice.

Re-materialization

It seems obvious to note that worship depends on things like food, bodies, movement, objects, singing, and so on, but we have not always thought so. For over five hundred years, for example, the laity avoided receiving communion physically, so much so that in 1214, the Lateran Council decreed that Christians must receive communion at least once a year during Easter. Around the same time Aquinas approved of making a “spiritual” communion, but adding that it was *not the same as physical eating*. Even three centuries later Thomas Cranmer had to write long admonitions to the people encouraging them to receive communion, and had to settle for monthly eucharist rather than weekly.

In liturgy, the remedy for spiritualization is, if I may coin a neologism, *re-materialization*. This involves not only engaging the physical actions, persons, and objects in worship, fully and without abbreviation, but more than that: it involves ritually celebrating our vision of physical life in the reign of God when it comes, – its beauty, flow, joy, and harmony, rather than approaching worship always seeking the most efficient, cheapest minimum elements necessary for its validity. Rather, we can and should engage the stuff of worship *maximally*: Bread that looks, smells, and tastes like bread, enough water to be buried in, abundant oil, real candles, and other lights, etc. Without this respect for our physical elements, so easily accessible with no need for church catalogs, worship continues to suffer from a careless, threadbare existence. This call for full and complete use of symbols was issued by the liturgical movement more than sixty years ago and continues to be absent, I wager, from about 80% of Anglican congregations, which makes my point: we have an almost inbred tendency, almost inbred, to assume that matter is not important.

In sum, let’s work on healing our relationship to the material world, enjoyment, and pleasure, (i.e., to the goodness of creation). This need not take the place of the main eucharist on Sundays; much will be learned by experimenting with the eucharistic meal again and again on a different day or with different people, such as the youth group, as we engage new and ancient ways of rehearsing the nearness of the reign with sensitivity, imagination, and emotional intelligence, –a beautiful marriage of our faith, the Good News of the Reign, and our sensual, physical life. For the physicality of liturgy is no mere frosting on the cake. It is *essential* to the way worship works to communicate God’s grace by creating the experience of the Reign of God as we envision it.

Even after we do all this, however, there remains another challenge: our contemporaries' inability (or disinterest) in engaging signs and symbols. To this challenge we will turn next.

Seeds of the Church IV: The Liturgy of Compassion

April 9, 2024

This one It takes the form of a sermon delivered on Easter IIB, April 8, 2024

Remember last Sunday? Empty tomb, women afraid. Well, later that same Sunday, Jesus shows up: "Look at my wounded hands and feet. See? it is me!" The same one that they arrested and executed. Not a projection of your unconscious, not a fantasy or a pious thought.

Thomas missed it but the disciples were delighted, and of course they bragged: "We have seen the Lo-ord! But noooo, Thomas had to *see and touch* the wounds. So Jesus the next Sunday Jesus repeats the visit and says: "Tom, here, look: touch my wounds! Happy those who have not seen and yet believe." I always cringe a little when I hear that. Do I believe? In Greek, "believe" means trust; as in, "I believe in you, son." And you'll notice that in the Creed we don't believe *that*.... We believe *in*.... We *trust in* God, and in Jesus, risen up after being tortured and executed *unjustly*.

The French critic and theologian, Renee Girard suggests that the gospels are a first in the history of literature until that time because they reveal our *scapegoating* mechanism, by which we and most societies maintain their unity at the expense of scapegoated "others." Especially in Mark, Jesus is like the Old Testament scapegoat, except in this case the scapegoat turns out to be God. It is *God* who bears our scapegoating of the innocent, from Jesus himself to thousands of children in Gaza, and in so doing pays the price of manumission to free us from slavery to the powers of evil and death.

We too carry wounds: physical, emotional, spiritual wounds of neglect, abuse, rejection, exile, grief... Some are so painful that we deny, ignore, or cover them up. But the wounds that hurt the most are the ones suffered through no fault of our own, *unjustly*: discrimination, bullying, misogyny, abuse, ridicule, loss, grief, despair... And so before anything else today, I speak to you as Robin Williams said to Matt Damon in Good Will Hunting: *It is not your fault. It is not your fault. It is not your fault.* And if it is, your sins are forgiven! *Already*. Trust in this. I know; it's *hard* to own our innocence, so conditioned are we to feel guilty.

Whole communities, too –even nations, carry *systemic* wounds like slavery, racism, homophobia, and sexism. We too, as a community gathered here, have shared wounds as well: wounds from pastoral negligence, or disappointment, disillusionment, even homophobic vandalism some decades back. It is good –if difficult– to know, touch and name our wounds, or they will be repressed and will drive us unconsciously to be wounded again or wound others. Let’s make friends within our wounds as a community, so we can overcome oppression, heal, and thrive, with confidence, strength, and courage.

Christianity *itself* has also been sorely wounded, especially in the developed world. At no other time in the last 1,700 years our reputation been more tarnished than now *and justly so*. For many, many people assume we are to be Christian is to be hypocritical, naive, deluded, violent, and obsessed with controlling sex, gender, and women’s bodies, taking everything literally and believing that earth came into being 6,000 years ago and humans lived with dinosaurs. All this thanks to pseudo “Christians” (not to say heretics) who confuse God with their own need for control, forgetting that Christ reigns as king hanging on a cross, abandoned and helpless, covered in blood and spit, identifying with the scapegoats of the world. These pseudo “Christians” scapegoat anyone who is not like *them*. They are an anti-church, with their anti-Christ, Agent Orange, the Father of Lies, a con man, all bombast and arrogance, selling his anti-Bible.

But we insist: God has vindicated the scapegoat, raising him up. We recognize him here, sharing a meal in his memory and serving those in need of housing in Juarez, in need of food at Pete’s Place and the Food Bank, in need of a work permit –some years back, through our DACA program. *This* is how we witness to Christ’s resurrection, not by spewing pious platitudes. *This* is why we have a good reputation in this town: we walk the talk. For our religion is not *only* “spiritual.” Without real, tangible good news to the poor it is mere *hot air*. Our spirituality is much more than suspecting that there is more to life than shopping, and babbling about being “spiritual.’ In fact, Christian spirituality is *physical*. For like it or not we are *physical*: (well, I like it!). *God knows this*, and so became flesh for our sake. *God knows this* and so our spiritual lives take place in and through our bodies. *God knows this* and so liturgy is much more than a lot of words and ideas but an event involving bodies, objects, sounds and silences, chewing and swallowing; an event in which we *recognize* Christ here, among us.

Most stories of Jesus’ resurrection involve recognizing Jesus on Sunday, often while eating. Last Sunday, Mary Magdalene took Jesus for a gardener til she recognized him.

Today Thomas recognizes Jesus –after *touching* him. Next Sunday (again on Easter Day) two disciples going to Emmaus who recognized him in the breaking of the bread go back to tell the disciples and Jesus shows up again, asks for food, and again, they recognize him..

These stories are not only about then and there, in Jerusalem, but about every Christian congregation gathered to eat the Supper of the Lord over the last 2,000 years. They also are stories about us, here and now, eating with Jesus our Head as his living, risen *Body*. This is at the core of our religion, and it is very, very ancient, already in place *before any stories about Jesus were written down*. Even before Paul first wrote around the year 50 we were *already* gathering to share a *full* meal, at first with hungry, homeless Galileans dispossessed of their lands by Herod for failing to pay their taxes or maybe mortgages of a sort. He took their lands to build the new cities of Sepphoris and Cesarea.

We called these full meals *eucharistia*, or thanksgiving, and *agape*, or feast of affection. (recent modern scholarship identifies the two as one and the same). And for at *least* our first two hundred years, worship and “outreach” in service were one single event. It makes sense, for in Greek cities, “liturgy” originally meant service to the community, and only later a service of worship to God. So liturgy is not only worship, but includes our service to the poor and suffering by offering immediate relief, but even more importantly, by addressing the *systemic* causes of the world’s suffering, questioning economic and political policies that keep the poor poor while the rich get richer by the second. This is *an essential* part of our worship and the exercise of our religion, *our tangible* witness to the continuing life of Jesus in his *ekklesia*, the gathered congregation at a meal, among us here, where his Presence is manifested

Sometimes, we miss this Presence; at other times it knocks us off our horse, like St. Paul realizing that, “oh man, wow!” “persecuting Christians, I am persecuting Jesus! Wow!” It made such an impression on him that only a few years later he wrote to the Christians in Corinth where the rich were spurning the poor at their meals, to break them the news that we *are Christ’s risen body*. Christ the Head, gone off into eternity; but we, the rest of his Body, *still here*, continuing his healing work, driven by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor. The author of Collossians called it “Christ among us, the hope of Glory.” (Col. 1:27) and the writer of Ephesians practically swoons over it: “This is a great mystery –I speak of Christ and his Church” (Eph 5:32).

No wonder Augustine could say to his congregation in North Africa, ...these realities are called sacraments because in them one thing is seen, while

another is grasped. What is seen is a mere physical likeness; what is grasped bears spiritual fruit. ...listen to Paul: “You are the body of Christ, member for member.” [1 Co. 12.27] ...it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! ... When you hear “The body of Christ” you reply “Amen.” Be a member of Christ’s body, then, so that your “Amen” may ring true! ...Be what you see; receive what you are. (Sermon 272). And elsewhere, “You are the bread on the altar, the body of Christ... You are to be taken;... blessed, broken, and given; that you may be the means of grace and the vehicles of the Eternal love.” (Sermon 57).

How is that possible? Paul, never at a loss for words, explains how: “Don’t you know, that when you were baptized into Christ you were plunged into his death? ... you were planted with him in his death so that just as he was raised up by the Father’s glory, you too may walk in newness of life. For if you became like him through an *imitation* of his death, you will also be like him in [an imitation of] his rising up.” (Ro. 6:3, ff).

And so we too have risen with Christ, already, our wounds healed, transfigured, and luminous; for we are the *Uprising* of Jesus here, today, in this shared meal, yes, but equally so in our work for justice and peace, touching the wounds of our broken world to heal them. An Uprising without guns. An Uprising that does *not* want to take over the government, or deny election results. An Uprising that does not worship false gods like wealth, power, control, racism, nor white “Christian” nationalism. An Uprising that does *not* want power and control over others.

Instead, in this meal, we can already touch, recognize and trust in God’s coming Kingdom: a *new* society characterized by truth, justice, peace, and love. And so like Jesus in Galilee, we also feed, heal, and welcome *all*, especially the scapegoats of the world: undocumented migrants, people of color; women, tax collectors, prostitutes, LGBTQ people, (Pssst, even *Republicans*). And like Jesus, we announce that sins are forgiven *already!* For free, – without conditions. For God welcomes us just as we are: wounded, blind, conflicted, doubting, yet washed, walking by trust, and not by sight.

We are the Risen Body, –the Uprising– of Jesus; and so my greeting, “the Lord be with you” is not a wish, but a *recognition* of “Christ among you, the hope of glory,” my Christian “namaste.”

The Lord *IS* with you.

Seeds of the Future Church V: The Wounded, Healing Church

April 18, 2024

The Church is wounded, and deservedly so. Paradoxically, we can be healed and help society to heal by getting over our denial, fear and shame about our condition and looking at it fearlessly, share what we learn in mission driven work full of healing energy. For our wounds do not consist only of having lower numbers of members and clergy; they stem from a series of tragic turns along our long history, bringing us to today's tarnished reputation. The quandary may be summed up in an obnoxious question: If we have such "good news to share," how come people are not beating down our doors? The quick answer is: we have misunderstood the news.

We have been wounded many times before, sometimes literally. These are glorious wounds, the price paid for our discipleship and witness. At our beginnings and occasionally later, they have made us credible, even exemplary, as a community.

Other wounds, however, originate in our infidelity to God, seeking the idols that the Bible warn us about: greed, power and control, all in the service of our insecure selves to prop ourselves up invulnerable above others, all power and glory with no hint of martyrdom. These betrayals have hurt our mission, credibility, self esteem, and ability to serve. It's a long story, but perhaps a few examples will suffice to make my point.

In a previous article I mentioned the very real early threat of gnostic Christianity, despising matter and suspecting the body and its desires in the name of spiritual knowledge, as if the two could be separated. In this view, the phrase "reign of God" refers to a spiritual dimension *disconnected* from physical life rather than to a new healed society. Furthermore, this type of "Christianity" is not only heretical (ie., not the real thing); it also maims our ability to find God in everyday physical life, making the suffering of the world somehow irrelevant, while driving us into a very convenient obsession with our individual selves, our individual development and individual thoughts and feelings. By doing this, gnostic "Christianity" wounds the core of our identity as the *ekklesia* (gathering or assembly) of God turning a community into a self-service spiritual store. This is not a problem only for Evangelical pseudo Christians but as far as I can tell, for all the churches in North America.

And so, in exchange for our power (disappearing by the minute!) and a little reassurance for our narcissistic selves, we have ditched our

incarnational values: our reverence and love for creation, the body and its desires: ie., *this* world, letting go of our identification with the poor and our practiced vision of a healed society in favor of another reign, somewhere else,. –an egoic hope serving the needs of our insecurity.

[On our identification with the poor in the Early Church, see, David Bentley Hart's excellent article at <https://jacobin.com/author/david-bentley-hart%5D>.

From our beginnings, this individualistic spiritualization of the Christian life has Christianity has walked alongside, tempting us. More recently, it drove Freud to his now classic description: “religion is regression in the service of the ego (self).” –That is, in religious experience human beings pedal back to being children loved and supported (and punished) by a metaphysical parent, to support and strengthen their sense of self (ego). And yes, we all need a little of that from time to time, but Freud's description misses a crucial element of practically every religion on earth: *religions are social constructs*, involving communities expressing their shared meaning of life (worldview) and how to live it (ethos) through the telling of stories and the doing of rites.

This is why for any religion to be of any use, it must form its members in the art of interpreting stories and rites. Our disinterest in doing this is another wound we continue to inflict upon ourselves, conveniently assuming (perhaps infected by Rousseau's notion of the “good savage?”) that human beings are somehow born Christian. Meanwhile we are all catechized round the clock in the religion of consumerism and the worship of capital. I frankly do not understand why we assume that Christians do not need formation in the art of being citizens of a different kind of world.

Not surprisingly, these and other self-inflicted wounds have wounded others. The list is long and egregious: We have abused, tortured and murdered millions for gain, power and control, often in the name of God. We have embraced an anthropocentric worldview that sees nature as a mere backdrop to be exploited. We have condemned people to perpetual insecurity about their souls and shame about their bodies, through body/sex negativity, homophobia, and sexism, in the service of cis patriarchy and its powers. By falling into an individualistic, spiritualized version of Christianity, we have also spiritually wounded millions by giving them the stone of “private religion” for the bread of community.

Thus we undermined their very real need for formation in Christian living in community, assuming that human beings are fine just as they are, with no need for redemption, and that the church is a sort of spiritual store, encouraging whatever fantasies individual members may develop about

Christianity, the gospel and the reign of God, especially the fantasy that Christianity is all about power and control over others.

Still, we do not have to sit around, scraping our sores like Job. We can reclaim our Easter voice, (“we shall not die, but live!”) and share our core message without the usual bombast of clerics, but tentatively, quietly, humbly, with confidence, in *deeds*. And should words be necessary, we might whisper “The reign of God is near; turn your hearts and trust the good news: a new world is coming.” This may put a lot of theologians out of work (kidding!), but I doubt that we can restore our credibility any other way.

In sum, our wounds as a church undermine and shrink us even in our grandiose narcissism (we *wait* for members to come in!), but the pain and anxiety they cause can be generative, stinging us enough to pay attention, question, discover and reach for healing as a community. Providentially, we may be stripped of much of our grandiosity soon enough, liberating us to be what *we must* be: the community of God’s reign, worshiping a crucified God, disinterested in power and control, and working to heal the world around us.