

THEY KNEW IT WAS THEIRS ALL THE TIME

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[A change in eucharistic practice led to a new understanding of liturgy in general]

It happened on an Ash Wednesday afternoon a few years ago. I was preparing myself for the evening's service and thinking about imposing ashes on the foreheads of the worshipers. I had a mixture of feelings.

Awe-- God will do something extraordinary tonight through something as simple as ashes. I don't know how God will do it. I'm simply grateful that God will do it.

Gratitude-- I feel so grateful that the church has entrusted this sacramental ministry to me.

Self doubt-- Why, in heaven's name, did the church ever trust me with this? I don't understand Psalm 51. I don't know the history of Lent. My sermon sounds like last year's sermon. What will the parishioners think if they know my noble effort to use ashes from last year's palms was subverted by my inability to find last year's palms?

There was still one more feeling. I'd have to call it dis-ease. I kept thinking about the energizing moments I had experienced in years past as I imposed ashes. I remembered an Ash Wednesday service early in my ministry in which one of the durable saints of the congregation graced me with an epiphany. When I came to her place at the altar rail, I imposed her forehead and said, "Marjorie, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." She looked up at me with a tender and discerning glance from her 75 year old eyes, and said, "THANK GOD." I had never really thought of mortality as good news, but she did.

Finally, I realized what my dis-ease was about. If I had such rich memories of my Ash Wednesday experiences, and if I had such a sense of expectation about my priestly duties that evening, then why was I

standing in the way of other people having the privilege of being sacramental ministers?

The questions flooded into my head, and so did the projections of my own anxiety. The biggest question was, 'If I invite people into a 'priestly' function, am I stepping outside the order of the church? Am I committing liturgical mutiny?' The biggest projection was that people would be reticent, embarrassed or shocked to be given a priestly role. They'd look at me and say, "Don't we pay you to do this?"

But in the wrestling match between the Holy Spirit and my projected anxiety, the Holy Spirit was the clear winner. I decided that when we came to the imposition of ashes I would simply ask the worshipers to gather in a circle and would invite them to be priests to each other. Though still a little anxious about this, I was convinced that the possible blessings of this kind of sacramental intimacy far outweighed the complaints I might get about somebody using too many ashes or imposing someone's nose.

What I did not count on was that the Holy Spirit had a much larger agenda that afternoon. Flushed with this sense of what the evening might hold, I continued my preparation. I turned to a collection of eucharistic prayers in order to find the one for Ash Wednesday. I was overwhelmed again. If I felt convicted about the sacramental role the congregation might play in the imposition of ashes, then what sense did it make for me to pretend that the eucharistic prayer belonged to me? I had certainly been schooled in the fact that the Sursum Corda was a way for the priest to gain the congregation's authorization to

proceed on their behalf. I was part of a denomination that, while not high church, was certainly hierarchical enough to look to the ordained to preside at the table. But I also knew that there was a deep stirring within me and that I'd better pay attention to it.

Part of the stirring was that I could never quite figure out why the particular congregation I was serving did so much complaining about the eucharistic liturgy.

- Can't we use a different eucharistic prayer? We've used the same liturgy twice in a row.
- Can't we sing a different Sanctus?
- Why did we sing a different Sanctus?

I wondered at first whether it was just the way a congregation with a lot of highly educated people behaves. They're frightened enough of the affective parts of worship and so wary of emotionalism that it feels safer to keep the eucharist at the head level. I think that was part of it, but I now think that the 'complaints' were really a deep longing to be included.

So, I called my colleagues on the staff and asked whether they would have any objection to trying something different that Ash Wednesday evening. I felt that it might be empowering if we were to divide the eucharistic prayer in 8-10 short sections according to the sense of the prayer itself. We would type it out, photocopy it and place the sub-divided prayer in the worship bulletin. But in addition to having the short sections of the prayer that individuals would offer, I felt that we ought to say the Words of Institution together. So, I capitalized the Words of Institution as well as the words to the Sanctus and memorial acclamation.

My plan was that I would stand up at the beginning of the service and give brief testimony to what had happened within me

that afternoon and to what was going to happen in the service. I would lead out on the Sursum Corda, but then we would rely on the Holy Spirit to raise up others to offer the several sections of the prayer. My staff colleagues were enthusiastically supportive.

The imposition of ashes that evening was a wonderful work of the Holy Spirit. Many who attended had never been to an Ash Wednesday service before. Therefore, the phrases used during the imposition were new to them. The sound of the voices repeating "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" and "Repent, and believe the gospel" was musical. The empowerment mixed with anxiety that I saw on the faces of those first-time worshippers was also moving.

One of our parishioners had polio as a teenager and comes to worship in a motorized wheelchair. She does not have the use of her right hand, and her left hand fits into a device that helps to guide the chair. As the ashes passed around the circle, I was seized with a sense of horror that I might have excluded this wonderful woman from the act of imposing ashes given her limited dexterity. What happened was a work of God. The woman who was beside her leaned over, placing her head on the tray table of the wheelchair, close enough to allow for the imposition. Priesthood and compassion intersected in a magnificent way.

When we came to the eucharistic prayer that evening, I led out with the Sursum Corda, and after hearing, "It is right to give God thanks and praise," I took a deep breath and waited. That is, I thought I would have to wait. I didn't.

What followed was life changing for me. Among those who took a role in the prayer were:

- a man struggling with whether he ought to remain within the congregation because of a regrettable internal squabble over church landscaping
- a woman who was overcoming the effects of having been emotionally abused as a child
- a man who had never spoken in worship and rarely did in Sunday School
- a woman who had wrestled with a call to ministry in an age in which ordained ministry did not seem an option for women
- a man who, having shared his homosexual orientation with his parents, had been banished from their house, and forbidden to see his nieces and nephews

As the people spoke, I felt the joy of witnessing the power of inclusion. I realized that the reason the people took to the new eucharistic practice so instinctively was that they knew that the prayer was theirs all the time.

In addition to the joy of experiencing the ready participation of the worshipers, I also noticed that I felt enormous relief. Throughout my early ministry I wrestled with the administration of the sacraments. Should I try to memorize the eucharistic prayer so I can address the people more eye-to-eye? Should the book be on the table or should I hold it aloft? Should I kneel? I was embarrassed to name this whole thing as 'performance anxiety,' but that's really what it was.

I viewed myself as an able liturgist and wanted to pride myself on doing things smoothly. But the cost of that performance anxiety was that I was completely exhausted after communion services. But on this night, I was energized. I was drawing strength from the participation of the laity. We were all in it together. I wasn't reminding them that "on the night in which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread.." We were in the story together.

In the months that have followed, the change in our eucharistic practice has spurred much reflection and some more changes. It has certainly changed the way in which I approach my role as a worship leader. My initial anxiety over the shared eucharistic prayer related to my worry that I had been ordained, among other things, to preside at the table. What I now realize is that I do still preside at the table, only with a different understanding of what it means to preside.

I used to think that presiding meant doing and saying everything; being the lead actor in the eucharistic drama. Now I enjoy a new way of presiding:

- making certain that the table is 'set'; recruiting and overseeing the group which prepares the table and provides for bread and juice
- explaining our eucharistic practice to visitors and new members
- talking to people after they have participated in the prayer to see how the experience affected them

This method of presiding is more like the method we would hope to see practiced by someone presiding at a church meeting. We don't want the chairperson of the church's leadership group to feel as though she or he has to utter every word spoken at a meeting. Now I'm not the lead actor in the drama; I'm a midwife in the birth of a sacramental moment.

Another change is in the questions we ask in worship preparation. Previously we had been guided by the question, 'What scripture will form the basis of this week's service, and how will that scripture inform all that we do?' We still ask that question first. But now we also ask, 'How can we return more of the service to the people?'

One way we decided to do this was to open the invocation to the congregation. After our gathering music, I stand and bid someone to invoke the Spirit's presence on our worship and then I sit down. Sometimes we wait quite a while, but there is a wonderful pregnancy in the waiting. Since we started the custom just before Advent a few years ago, a parishioner wrote me a note in mid-December commenting on our new approach to the invocation. "What a wonderful symbol of Advent--," she said, "waiting for the prayer." I even had a few parishioners approach me and say, "You really chose someone beforehand, didn't you?" They were both amazed and pleased that the answer was, "No."

On Christmas Eve of that same year we designed a service in which the entire liturgy would be done by the congregation. My colleague in ministry and I merely stood to greet the congregation at the beginning and to call for the offering. Otherwise, we sat among the congregation. The Luke birth narrative was divided into parts and printed in the bulletin. A short collect followed each reading. We simply announced that we would wait for the Spirit's guidance to see who would be called forth to lead each part. We did not designate who would light the Advent candles. We did an impromptu "Las Posadas" with the children, asking different parts of the congregation to be different innkeepers or householders saying that there was "NO ROOM." We treat the passages in people's lives very seriously and call upon members of the congregation to offer spontaneous words of welcome for those arriving, words of wisdom and blessing for those departing and words of encouragement for those being consecrated to various ministries of the church. The laying on of hands and anointing are normally part of those consecrations. Anointing became important to the congregation because of its intrinsic power,

but also because anointing had been so central in the life of my colleague in ministry. Having been raised in African-American churches in which anointing was central, she brought the richness of her experience and heritage. The congregation, through this gifted woman, came to see that anointing had been theirs all the time too.

Have we done something radical or courageous? No. The people knew the liturgy was theirs all the time. Even though they sense that there is a high degree of participation, no one leaves the sanctuary feeling as though they had participated in a liturgical Boston Tea Party. Have we done something counter-cultural? Yes and No. It is counter to most churches in our area where worship leadership comes primarily from the 'podium.' It is counter to the practice of having the voices of straight, white males predominate. But it is not counter to new participatory trends in culture; trends which question hierarchy and encourage decision making at all levels.

The presence of many voices, some of whom had been actively silenced in other places, is the most energizing part of this new practice. Routinely, most of the voices heard within the eucharistic prayer are the voices of women and the voices of the gay men and lesbians of the congregation. What I hear in that chorus is an affirmation something like this: "God has been inviting me to the table all along. It was time for you to see that I wanted to be part of the dinner conversation. May the church never exclude me from the conversation again."

While liturgy has an important function in ordering the way in which we worship, it must never be designed to control the people of God. When the only role the congregation plays in the liturgy is the role assigned them by those in the chancel, the work of the Holy Spirit is thwarted. We must

not be frightened about what people may say or do in worship. Even if the active participation of the congregation in all parts of the liturgy seems messy to some, I am confident that God can find a way to bless this particular mess.

I certainly spend time being embarrassed that it took me so long to figure out that the liturgy was ours to share rather than mine to lead. But most of the time, I'm deeply grateful.

John Thornburg is a preacher/singer who believes in the transforming power of the gospel. He loves to laugh with others and at himself. In his 22 years of parish ministry, he was known as an innovative worship leader and teacher as well as an inspiring preacher. His mentors for this ministry include people like Jane Marshall, John Bell, Michael Hawn, Billy Crockett, and Ruth Duck. He was the song leader of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church for 10 years, and has led singing at several regional and national gatherings.

Visit John's webpage and learn about his ministry of helping congregations sing!

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